

## **The role of railways between two blocs during the Cold War in Hungary**

El papel de los ferrocarriles entre dos bloques durante la Guerra Fría en Hungría

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**Abstract:** After World War II, the different agendas of the two superpowers (United States and Soviet Union) led to the establishment of two world orders separated by the Iron Curtain. Hungary had a geopolitical importance for the Soviet Union, as a military buffer zone. After the Soviet defeat of the 1956 revolution, it remained within the Eastern bloc. The Iron Curtain, which unveiled physically in 1949, in theory, blocked the Hungarian railways towards Austria. In practice, however, things were slightly different. The Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom(-Vienna) section of the Hungarian State Railways (MÁV) was considered the main railway artery of Hungary. In the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd(-Graz) railway, traffic was uninterrupted, but with a smaller volume. The main line of the Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurth Railway (GYSEV), inaugurated in 1875 and jointly owned by Austria and Hungary, and the Fertővidéki HÉV (Local Railways) under its management, were even more exceptional. Therefore, the railway of the monarchic days and the local railways under its management did not cease to exist but continued to operate between two countries and two world-systems, in a unique fashion. In this article, I aim to illustrate that the Iron Curtain was not a hermetic seal between Austria and Hungary. There were some gaps in the wall, the most obvious of which was the railway that was used for illegal migration and smuggling. My study focuses on those three main lines, considering that they were the main arteries for high-volume cross-border traffic.

**Keywords:** Iron Curtain, Railway, Two World Orders, Hungarian Railways

**JEL Codes:** F02, F22, L91, L92, P33

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**Resúmen:** Después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, las diferentes agendas de las dos superpotencias (Estados Unidos y Unión Soviética) llevaron al establecimiento de dos órdenes mundiales separados por el Telón de Acero. Hungría tenía una importancia geopolítica para la Unión Soviética, como zona de amortiguación militar. Después de la derrota soviética de la revolución de 1956, permaneció dentro del bloque del Este. El Telón de Acero, que se inauguró físicamente en 1949, en teoría, bloqueó los ferrocarriles húngaros hacia Austria. En la práctica, sin embargo, las cosas fueron ligeramente diferentes. El tramo Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom (-Vienna) de los Ferrocarriles Estatales Húngaros (MÁV) se consideraba la principal arteria ferroviaria de Hungría. En el ferrocarril Szombathely-Szentgotthárd (-Graz), el tráfico era ininterrumpido, pero con un volumen menor. La línea principal del ferrocarril Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurth (GYSEV), inaugurado en 1875 y de propiedad conjunta de Austria y Hungría, y los Fertővidéki HÉV (Ferrocarriles locales) bajo su gestión, fueron aún más excepcionales. Por lo tanto, el ferrocarril de los días monárquicos y los ferrocarriles locales bajo su administración no dejaron de existir, sino que continuaron operando entre dos países y dos sistemas mundiales, de una manera única. En este artículo, pretendo ilustrar que el Telón de Acero no era un sello hermético entre Austria y Hungría. Había algunos huecos en el muro, el más obvio de los cuales era el ferrocarril que se usaba para la migración ilegal y el contrabando. Mi estudio se centra en esas tres líneas principales, considerando que eran las arterias principales para el tráfico transfronterizo de gran volumen.

**Palabras clave:** Telón de Acero, Ferrocarril, Dos Órdenes Mundiales, Ferrocarriles Húngaros

**Códigos JEL:** F02, F22, L91, L92, P33

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### **List of acronyms used in the text:**

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ÁVH – Állami Védelmi Hatóság (State Defence Authority)

BBÖ – Bundesbahnen Österreich (Austrian Railways)

GYSMH – Győr-Sopronmegyei Hírlap

GYSEV – Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurth Vasút (Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurth Railway)

HÉV – Helyi Érdekű Vasúti (Countryside Suburban Railways)

HUF – Hungarian forints (currency)

*KA – Kisalföld*

MÁV – Magyar Államvasutak (Hungarian State Railways)

MNL-OL, GYSEV – State Archives of Hungarian National Archives. *GYSEV Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurti Vasút Rt.* 1945-1960. XXIX-H 51

MNL-SL – Sopron Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron County of Hungarian National Archives. VI. 435. XXIV. 406. 68. box

*N – Népszabadság* (People's Freedom)

*NA – Népakarat* (People's Will)

ÖBB – Österreichische Bundesbahnen

*SZN – Szabad Nép* (Free People)

*VG – Világgazdaság* (World Economy)

*VM – Vasmegye* (Vas County)

*VN – Vas Népe* (People of Iron)

## 1. Introduction

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The end of World War II did not mark the beginning of a peaceful period. Hungary turned east towards Sovietization, and the Soviet Union saw it as an important military foreground. However, with the Iron Curtain descending slowly, relations between the two world orders – Austria and Hungary – did not end, and the railway continued to operate under strict control and certain conditions.

The Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom(-Vienna) section of the MÁV was Hungary's main line. On the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd(-Graz) railway, operation was uninterrupted, although in a smaller scale. The main line of the GYSEV, built in 1875, and jointly owned by Austria and Hungary, and the Fertővidéki HÉV (regional railways) were other examples – the latter even more unique. Private railways from the days of the monarchy and local networks continued operation between two countries and two world systems: the East and the West.

In this article I illustrate how the Iron Curtain did not separate the two worlds completely. There were holes in it, some of them punched in by the railway. This essay concentrates on the three lines mentioned above, which ran in regions of high-volume cross-border international traffic. Sources include local historical literature on railway and regional history and unpublished primary sources (archives, contemporary press, and oral history). I offer an original approach to this topic, of economic, social, and historical relevance.

## 2. The construction and operation of the lines until 1945

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### 2.1. Period before World War I

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In Hungary, on 15 July 1846, the first steam-powered railway, between Pest and Vác, was inaugurated. Sixty years later, the Hungarian railway system was one of the busiest in Europe (Horváth, 2018, pp. 48-56). By 1914, the main and the tributary lines of the Hungarian system were to a large extent completed. The network extended throughout 22,869 km (21,258 km of which standard gauged and 1,611 km narrow gauged). The rail density (7.1 km/100 km<sup>2</sup>) approached Hungary to ratios of countries of the European core and surpassed those of southern and south-eastern Europe (Czére, 1989, p. 104).

Construction of the Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom-Vienna railway began in 10 August 1856, when its first section (with a length of 115 km between Bruck an der Leitha, Győr, Komárom, and Újszőny) was leased to the Austrian State Railway. Direct link between Budapest and Vienna had to wait almost thirty years to come into effect, when, in 1884, the Kelenföld-Újszőny line was inaugurated by MÁV<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vasuti és Közlekedési Közlöny* (Railway and Transport Bulletin), 13 July 1884, 82, p. 688.

As for the railways towards Graz, a line beginning in Győr was advocated since 1867. It was inaugurated in 1873. The track between Szombathely and Gyanafalva, first section of the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd-Graz railway, was opened for business on 1 September 1872, as a part of the Hungarian Western Railway. By 1873, the remaining sections between Győr and Szombathely, Székesfehérvár and Veszprém, Veszprém and Kiscell, and Gyanafalva and Graz were concluded (Weinhoffer, 1979, p. 438). Consequently, as early as 1873, it was possible to travel by train to Graz from Győr and Budapest.

The GYSEV was contracted in 1872<sup>2</sup>, but the economic recession of the following year postponed the creation of a joint-stock company to 1875 (Hahnenkamp, 1994, pp. 46-47). By January 1876, regular traffic was established between Győr and Sopron. In October 1879, the line to Ebenfurth was inaugurated throughout. Starting in December 1897, GYSEV also managed the Fertővidéki HÉV (Pándorfalu–Eszterháza-Fertőszentmiklós–Kiscell). GYSEV's operation resumed until 1922 (Gürtlich and Székely, 2015, p. 36).

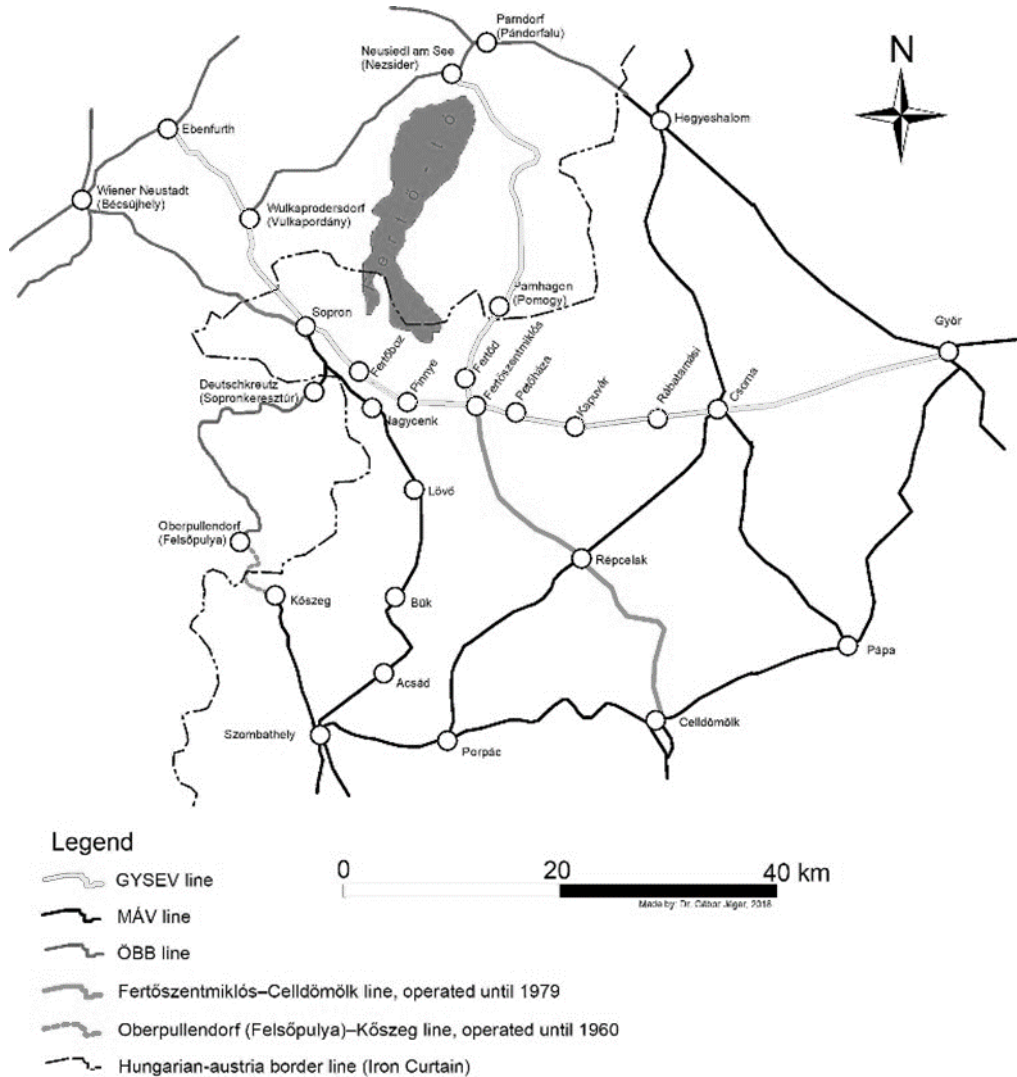
## **2.2. The railway sector during the Trianon peace dictatorship (1920-1945)**

In the aftermath of World War I, the Trianon peace treaty, signed on 4 June 1920, stripped Hungary of 2/3 of its former territory and 2/3 of its former railway network. A similar proportion of rolling stock, to say the least, was also delivered to neighbouring countries (Eperjesi, 1994, pp. 159-160). The treaty rearranged the *thousand-year* border between Austria and Hungary. Nevertheless, no tensions emerged between both nations that sought a policy of compromise (Tóth, 2006, pp. 37-48; Zsiga 1991, p. 100-114).

The rearrangement of the Hungarian historical frontier divided many railways in the region. One of them was the Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom-Bruck an der Leitha (operated by MÁV), which was split up by the new border between Hegyeshalom and Nickelsdorf (Miklóshalma). The Szombathely-Szentgotthárd-Graz line was split further east, between Szentgotthárd and Mogersdorf (Nagyfalva). Moreover, the section between Szentgotthárd and the frontier was delivered to Austria, and the city became a customs station (Weinhoffer, 1979, p. 451)<sup>3</sup>. The Hungarian network of GYSEV was divided at Sopron, and the HÉV of Fertővidék was divided between Mekszikópuszta and Pamhagen (Pomogy).

<sup>2</sup> *Hatályos jogszabályok* (Legislation in force), 27, 1872 (available in: [net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=87200027.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=87200027.TV), accessed 20 April 2020).

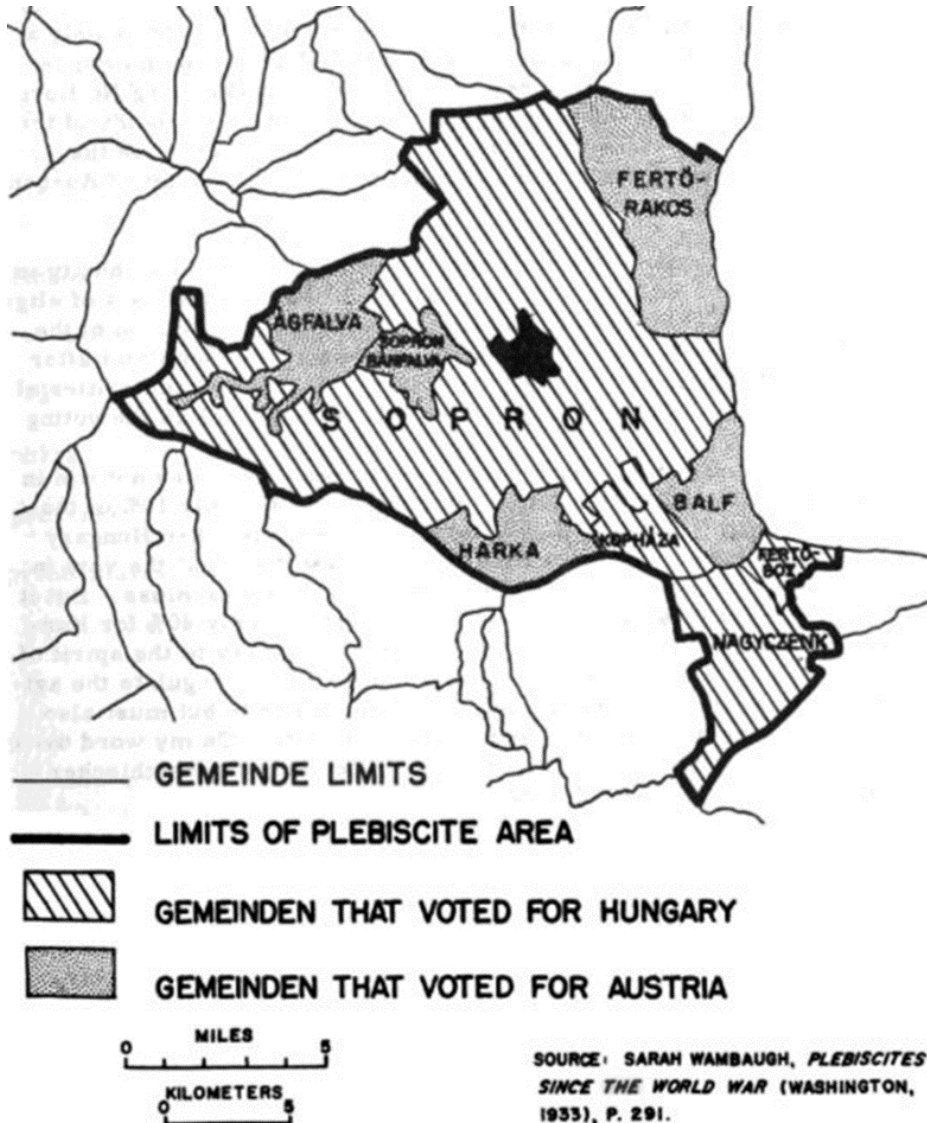
<sup>3</sup> The tracks between Sopron and Kőszeg, Sopron and Pozsony, Körmend and Németújvár, Szombathely and Pinkafő, Felsőőr, Tarcsa, and Felsőlövő, and Felsőlászló, Sárvár, and also Zalabér HÉV, which belonged to the local railways, were partly or completely transferred to Austria. A similar outcome was faced by the Sopron-Wiener Neustadt line (Kubinszky, et al., 2009, pp. 80-102). These lines are not included in this study.



**Figure 1. The cross-border lines in the northwest of Hungary in the twentieth century**  
 Source: Author's own making

Regardless, traffic in these lines did not cease to exist. Only passport checks were introduced at the new borders. There were minor disruptions in 1921, as the BBÖ took over operation on the Austrian side (but not even attacks by Hungarian rebel troops made them leave the area). In the other lines analysed in this paper (Győr to Ebenfurth and the regional system), GYSEV took over the maintenance of the tracks, whereas BBÖ managed operation. Both companies continued negotiations regarding operation, as BBÖ did not have enough locomotives to manage traffic on regional lines that eventually were provided by GYSEV. Additionally, the result of the referendum in Sopron complicated things, as Sopron, which was essential for traffic on

the Austrian line, was supposed to remain in Austria (Sallai, 1996, p. 11). After the referendum, Austrian trains continued to pass through Sopron and to man the station with their own staff. In addition, duty-free and passport-free travel was introduced for Austrian passengers and goods going through Sopron (Zwickl, 2011, pp. 72-78).



**Figure 2. Results of the 1921 referendum**

Source: “Sopron és Szentpéterfa – Két határrevízió Nyugat-Magyarországon”, in *Blog Pangea*, available in: [pangea.blog.hu/2016/06/04/sopron\\_es\\_szentpeterfa\\_ket\\_hatarrevizio\\_nyugat-magyarorszagon](http://pangea.blog.hu/2016/06/04/sopron_es_szentpeterfa_ket_hatarrevizio_nyugat-magyarorszagon), downloaded on 14 September 2021)

Service on the Austrian side of Fertővidék HÉV was resumed by the Hungarian railways at the state border (to Eszterháza station). The Austro-Hungarian treaty of 1923 ratified the bilateral border agreements of 1921 (Locsmáncsi, 2009, p. 141) and 1922, settled the legal and operational issues of GYSEV, and confirmed (with minor modifications) the Hungarian concessions to Austria, GYSEV and Fertővidék HÉV (Gürtlich and Székely, 2009, p. 71). The management of Fertővidék HÉV was reassigned to GYSEV starting on 1 August 1923, as the former did not have any staff or railway equipment<sup>4</sup>. Traction and train service was provided by the same staff working in the Hungarian line. The staff had to know German, Austrian instructions related with railway operation, and wear Austrian uniforms during their service. GYSEV, a private company (headquartered in Eisenstadt and managed from Sopron) was the only company that almost did not suffer from the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, as it did not belong to any state organisation – it was owned by Austrian, Belgian, and German investors and financial institutions, who above all were interested in keeping the railway operation together (Lovas, 1969, p. 840).

The modification of the border between Austria and Hungary did not terminate relations between neighbouring regions, but it changed their nature (Locsmáncsi, 2009, p. 143). The railway Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom became Hungary's most important line to the West<sup>5</sup>. To respond to the increase in traffic, it was double tracked throughout its total extension. It was one of the first lines in Hungary to use electricity as motive power, initially between Budapest and Komárom (1932) and later (1934) to Hegyeshalom (Tisza, 1997, p. 65). Operation was conducted by the same company in both sides of the border, which accounts for the success of its cross-border traffic.

The annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938 (the Anschluss) did not bring significant change. The Deutsche Reichsbahn took over the tasks from BBÖ, despite a deterioration of relations between the Austrian and the Hungarian railway managements (Majdán, 2014, p. 121). The lines of MÁV and GYSEV played an important logistical and strategic role during World War II, carrying military traffic. For this reason, from 1944 onwards, the Allies continuously bombed these railways, causing substantial damage (Zwickl, 2011, pp. 122-131).

### **3. The Iron Curtain rolling down**

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#### **3.1. Reconstructions, stricter border control**

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In the years that followed the end of World War II, relations between the victors strained, each promoting their own doctrine: the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan on the American side, and Zhdanov–Stalin *two sides* theory by the Soviets. What is more, the conflict was not ended by the Paris peace treaties. It consequently led to

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>5</sup> The section from Budapest to Győr was completed in 1907 (*Vasuti és Közlekedési Közlöny*, 30 May 1907, 62. p. 483). Its conclusion to Hegyeshalom and the border was inaugurated in 1926.



the division of Europe in the Western and Eastern blocs, with the Iron Curtain in the middle.

Hungary became a forecourt of strategic importance to the West, although it was included in the Eastern bloc. In the spirit of Sovietization, a Stalin-type proletarian dictatorship was implemented in the country. On its western border, the construction of the Iron Curtain began, physically demarcating the two economic, ideologic, military, and political world orders (Fischer, 1992, pp. 113-127). Up to 1956, it was extended to the southern border of Hungary. It had a length of 356 km with the Austrian border (Hardi, 1999. p. 159). The Iron Curtain was guarded at the border, including wire barriers, minefields, and track and control zones (Zsiga, 1999, pp. 9-10).

World War II caused massive damage to the Hungarian railway network, including the four railways analysed in this study. Considering its strategic and logistic importance to the war effort, it became a priority target for Allied enemy aircrafts and for retreating German infantry troops. Countless bombs fell on the railway stations operating in the western part of Transdanubia: Sopron, Szombathely, Hegyeshalom, and Győr suffered considerable damage. The section between Hegyeshalom and Komárom in the Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom(-Vienna) line suffered the most serious damage. In addition, the track had to be rebuilt from Hegyeshalom to the border and beyond, as it had been completely torn up by the retreating German forces. This was necessary for the international traffic to be restarted with the Austrians.

After the war, the Hungarian lines were restored quite quickly. The Soviet Red Army handed the control of railway traffic to MÁV employees. Shortly afterwards, all lines came under Hungarian control. The civilian population, together with technical units of the army, restored the railway infrastructure as soon as possible (Majdán, 2014, pp. 147-148).

The line Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom(-Vienna) managed by MÁV quickly became one of the most important routes to the west. After the rapid completion of the restoration works, on 24 August 1945, the trains could travel – in theory – between Vienna and Budapest. One of the largest stations on this line was Győr, which had been bombed out of existence. By mid-August 1945, it was receiving trains from all directions, including Hegyeshalom and Sopron<sup>6</sup>. Just after the reconstruction, medical trains from Austria, carrying Hungarian wounded, sick, and prisoners, composed most international traffic.

By December 1945, railway traffic in the region reached another milestone: the GYSEV line connected to the Győr-Hegyeshalom track. Hence, trains arriving from Sopron could go to the MÁV station. What is more, the city was in direct contact with Budapest again. As a result, the railway company launched a direct service between Sopron and Budapest and a new passenger service.<sup>7</sup> At this time, there was an international express train in service between Vienna and Budapest (which had been bombed and soon completely rebuilt with the help of the Allies)<sup>8</sup>. The increase in cross-border

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<sup>6</sup> *Kossuth Népe* (People of Kossuth), 24 August 1945, 95. p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Dunántúli Szabad Nép* (Free People of Transdanubia), 29 November 1945, 96, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Demokrácia* (Democracy), 30 June 1946, 26, p. 4.

transportation motivated the reconstruction of the Hegyeshalom marshalling yard, destroyed during the war<sup>9</sup>. To meet and promote the increase in traffic, it was decided to electrify the line between Kelenföld and Almásfüzitő. The electrification was complete by 1949<sup>10</sup>. All this was part of the modernization plan to increase the capacity and performance of the most important lines, from a logistic point of view (Erdősi, 1987, p. 46). Starting in 1947, the modernization of the railway sector began in Austria. The electrification of the 72 km-section between Vienna and the border was conducted between 1950 and 1953<sup>11</sup>.

These improvements became more urgent after 1 February 1947 and the creation of direct rail freight services from Austria to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, via the Budapest-Hegyeshalom-Vienna line. Shortly later, the service was expanded to Hungary-Belgium and Switzerland-Romania<sup>12</sup>. Traffic was growingly concentrating towards Hegyeshalom. From 1931 onwards, new services connecting Vienna and Budapest were created, for instance, the Arlberg Express (travelling from Paris to Zurich, Vienna, and Budapest)<sup>13</sup>, the Árpád railway, and five other express trains. Beginning in 1948, the Orient Express arrived daily at Hegyeshalom and Budapest, and thrice a week at Bucharest and Budapest (Lovas and Tóth, 1991, pp. 229-230). The number of foreign tourists arriving in Hungary on this line was steadily increasing, as all who had a passport were allowed to enter the country. Most of outgoing tourists, diplomats and those visiting relatives in Vienna chose to board the train in Budapest.<sup>14</sup>

The relevance of the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd(-Graz) MÁV line decreased, in comparison with the latter railways. After the reconstruction, traffic resumed, but with a much smaller volume. It was also possible to cross the border to Austria, provided the passenger held a valid passport<sup>15</sup>. In June 1947, there was only one daily international train pair between Szentgotthárd and Graz. It was possible to travel by train from Szentgotthárd to Budapest Eastern Railway Station. Later, the Szentgotthárd-Graz line essentially became a railway devoted to freight transportation<sup>16</sup>.

As far as the GYSEV lines are concerned, they too suffered massive devastation during World War II. Reconstruction ensued in the aftermath of the conflict with aid from the Hungarian state. On 6 May 1945, transportation of passengers resumed on the line of the Fertővidék HÉV and on 20 July 1945 on the GYSEV line. Freight transport initially was slow, but it grew quickly as time went by. By 1946 the hardships faced by railway operators were vanquished. The timetables before the war were restored and cross-border services between Sopron and Ebenfurth was reinstated (Zwickl, 2011, p. 133). In 1946, railway state officials called for the nationalization of GYSEV that did not go through because, in accordance with the Three Power Pact of Berlin, the shares

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<sup>9</sup> *Kecskeméti Lapok* (Kecskemét Newspapers), 16 May 1946, 39, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Szabadság*, 16 January 1947, 12, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Elektrotechnika* (Electrical Engineering), 1 July 1947, 7, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> *Közgazdaság* (Economics), 2 March 1947, 9, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ujság* (Newspaper), 15 April 1931, 84, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *SZN*, 7 July 1948, 153, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Népszava* (Folk Word), 6 November 1946, 251, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> 3327. f. sz. K, 30. May, 1948. vol. 23. p. 7.

held by the Germans (39.9% of social capital) had been transferred to the Soviet Union. On 29 May 1946, the Hungarian government handed the shares to Marshal Voroshilov, Chairman of the Federal Control Commission. In the spirit of sovietisation of Hungary, the Soviet shareholders nominated six representatives (out of fifteen) to the Board of Directors of GYSEV in 1947.<sup>17</sup> Two years later, the Soviet Union transferred these shares to the Hungarian state under the legal umbrella provided by the law 20 of 1949 and by the Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic, in accordance with the II Moscow Protocol.<sup>18</sup> The influence of the state in the company increased significantly.

Starting on 15 November 1947, a strict limit of circulation on the western border was imposed to counter smugglers and illegal border crossings. The police and border patrols checked all vehicles and passers-by in an area of 15 km from the frontier. In addition, there were raids in the farms, the roads were sealed, and the area was combed through<sup>19</sup>. It became impossible to cross the border. Sopron, however, attracted defectors and smugglers<sup>20</sup>, due to the railway traffic to Austria and considering that it was only 3 km away from the border. Additionally, several options – such as Lake Fertő – offered a chance for illegal border crossing<sup>21</sup>, and the city was classified as an Austrian station outside Austria<sup>22</sup>. Another *paradise* for smugglers trafficking to Austria was Szentgotthárd and its surrounding area. Despite an increase in border control that reduced illegal migration<sup>23</sup>, cross-border rail traffic did not cease. Transnational movements between Mekszikópuszta and Pamhagen was authorised by the Soviet authorities on the Fertővidék HÉV in 1947. Previously, the Hungarian and Austrian parts were separately used in traffic (Lovas, 1998, p. 38).

In conclusion, trains were not hindered in interconnecting the two countries in the lines I analysed. GYSEV became a unique case, considering that Hungarian staff oversaw operation in Austria too. They could travel regularly across the border with a valid travel document, and therefore promoted some smuggling as well. Assorted manufactured goods and food items were smuggled by railwaymen<sup>24</sup>. Since 1948, many people crossed the border illegally with the help of railways and their staff, either hiding in the tenders of the locomotives, in the tanks or in freight trains travelling to Austria (Lovas, 1973, p. 16). Apparently, the authorities were unable to prevent this illegal mobility further illegal, despite stricter border control and anti-Western propaganda (that announced unemployment, slums, and hunger in the Western countries)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> MNL-SL, Magyar Közlekedésügyi Miniszter 39.738/1946.I.1. sz.

<sup>18</sup> Az 1956-os Intézet - Oral History Archívum (The 1956 Institute – Oral History Archive), 1949. évi XX. tc. *A Magyar Népköztársaság Alkotmánya* (The Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic), [www.rev.hu/sulinet45/szerviz/dokument/1949.evi3.htm](http://www.rev.hu/sulinet45/szerviz/dokument/1949.evi3.htm).

<sup>19</sup> *Friss Ujsag*, 26 November 1947, 269. p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Kossuth Népe*, 27 November 1947, 138, p. 299.

<sup>21</sup> *Kis Ujsag*, 19 December 1947, 148. p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>23</sup> *Kis Ujsag*, 27 May 1948, 120, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Gyula Nagy.

<sup>25</sup> *N*, 15 October 1956, 287, p. 3.

### 3.2. Proclamation of the People's Republic

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On 20 August 1949, the People's Republic was proclaimed in Hungary, which meant full nationalization of the private sector. In the same year, the Iron Curtain was built on the western border of Hungary; the minefield followed in 1952. An area 50 m to 500 m from the frontier became the "border zone", whereas the zone up to 15 km away from the frontier (20 km after 1952) became the "border area". Approaching these areas was subject to a permit issued by the police (Zsiga, 1999, p. 26).

In addition, a border guard, which was part of the ÁVH, oversaw the border (Gáspár, 2012, p. 39). As a result, communication between Austria and Hungary became virtually impossible, and international relations froze. In 1949, a governmental decree determined that the areas close to the border were for state use only, which reduced the number of dissidents and smugglers traversing the frontier. Additionally, surveillance of the western border was tightened, as there was a growing fear of espionage from Austria and the West<sup>26</sup>. The ÁVH used railway workers to oversee the border. After a three-month training, groups of station and train crew members were assembled to alert travelling strangers<sup>27</sup>. Special attention was given at Szentgotthárd.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the government of the Hungarian People's Republic decreed an amnesty that allowed Hungarian citizens, who had left their homeland during the war, to return home without any penalties. Since the summer of 1950, trains with Hungarian citizens were arriving at Hegyeshalom from Vienna<sup>29</sup>.

The suspension of the international high-speed train from Budapest eastern railway station to Vienna and Basel (and back) due to coal shortages was a threatening omen. Traffic between Hegyeshalom and Vienna was temporarily suspended on 15 July 1951 and the high-speed train pair ran between Budapest, Győr, and Szombathely only<sup>30</sup>. The Orient Express was also suspended (Lovas and Tóth, 1991, p. 230). In sum, cross-border traffic was temporarily restricted.

On 31 August 1950, the train patrol service was introduced in the GYSEV line and on 23rd July 1951 in the Fertővidék line. This meant that all the trains from Sopron and Fertőszentmiklós were accompanied by a patrolman. Only after the train was checked, could it leave to Austrian territory. Incoming trains were searched at the border and escorted to the Hungarian terminal. This was to prevent people from jumping from and to the trains (Lovas, 1973, p. 17).

When GYSEV was nationalised, MÁV had already prepared a draft contract for the provision of construction, maintenance, supervision, and traction for its Hungarian

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<sup>26</sup> Győr Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron County of Hungarian National Archives. Győr-Sopron Megyei Bizottság Archívuma 31. 1948-1950, 14. Jegyzőkönyv. 2. December, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> 1951. évi oktatási program. MNL-SL, VI. XXIV. 406. 66. box.

<sup>28</sup> VM, 23 January 1951, 18. p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Friss Ujsag*, 16 July 1950, 163, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Magyar Nemzet*, 15. July, 1951.vol. 163. p. 8.

lines<sup>31</sup>. However, the opposition from the Austrian government motivated that the original business practises of the company remained unchanged<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, the Hungarian government acknowledged the financial relevance of the Austrian lines to the Hungarian economy, considered important ‘*schilling revenues*’. Although the Hungarian state was already the unique shareholder of GYSEV, the nationalization process would have resulted in the loss of the Austrian sections, as they would have been merged in the ÖBB<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, according to the Austrian lease contract, GYSEV’s railway infrastructure could not be transferred to a third party without the consent of the Austrian Government. Thus, the nationalization of the company and the takeover of its operation was cancelled<sup>34</sup>.

At this time, the Soviet work organization had been implemented in MÁV and GYSEV. The 1949 five-year plan determined that by 1954, the railways had to transport 133% more goods and people<sup>35</sup>. The railway was considered the main artery of the country’s economy, and it was crucial to increase its capacity. On festive days (such as 4 April, 20 August<sup>36</sup> or the Railway Day<sup>37</sup>) rail workers made a vow or “socialist commitment” to further increase their performance. The Soviet working method and “work thrust” was a mandatory model for the employees of the Hungarian railways<sup>38</sup>, which promoted their estrangement from their Austrian counterparts. The Hungarian employees of GYSEV were granted a permit to move near the border for work motivations. An interesting phenomenon at the time was the “schilling revenue” and the “schilling allowance”. The latter meant that outgoing workers or those sent for training in Austria received benefits in Austrian currency in addition to their normal salary (Locsmándi, 2009, p. 146) and several daily allowances (officials, sent to Vienna to negotiate a matter concerning the entire GYSEV received the highest allowance, whereas those sent to negotiations unrelated with the Hungarian line, received 30% to 40% of the allowance). As for “schilling revenues”, at GYSEV and South Railway Stations in Sopron, the local ‘Resti’ pubs sold beer, wine and hot cold cuts called ‘debreceni’ on workers’ trains coming from Austria, which provided them a good income. This entailed uncontrolled schilling revenues, and it was not a desirable practice for state security reasons. Therefore, it was banned by the ÁVH in 1951.

Shortly afterwards, trains to and from Austria were physically separated from others in Sopron. In 1953, a new customs inspection building was built to handle domestic and foreign passengers (it operated until 2007, when Hungary was admitted to the Schengen area). Passengers in trains operating in Hungary were not allowed on the

<sup>31</sup> MNL-OL, GYSEV, *Szerződés*, 7814/101/1951.

<sup>32</sup> MNL-OL, GYSEV, *Feljegyzés*, Gy.25/450/1950.3.B. 10. July, 1950.

<sup>33</sup> MNL-OL, GYSEV, *Jelentés*, Gy. 25-348/1950.3.B.

<sup>34</sup> MNL-OL, GYSEV, *Feljegyzés*, 448/1950.

<sup>35</sup> MNL GYL MSZMP, 31. December, 1949.

<sup>36</sup> *GYSMH*, 12 August 1952, 189, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Railwaymen in Hungary celebrated Railway Day since 1951. Originally, it was on the second Sunday in August. In 1961, a governmental decision moved it to the second Sunday in July. *A Győr–Sopron–Ebenfurti Vasút Hivatalos Lapja*, 18 July 1951, 17, pp. 1-2.; *N*, 29 April 1961, 102. p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> *GYSMH*, 5 September 1952, 208, p. 3.

platform until the trains to Austria had left. On 16 June 1954, a new passenger building to control domestic passenger traffic was inaugurated (Lovas, 1973, p. 19). Additional restrictions were introduced in the Fertővidék HÉV. As tension between the Western and Eastern blocs grew, the Hungarian customs and border guard were moved back from Pamhagen to Mekszikópuszta. Although the former was in Austrian territory, it had a Hungarian station under the umbrella of the 1923 Treaty. For this reason, the station master was an Austrian citizen, but, if possible, he also had to speak Hungarian<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.3. The period of relief

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After Stalin's death in 1953, it was possible to establish a new, more democratic, government in Hungary, led by Imre Nagy. Consequently, the number of border guards was reduced (Zsiga, 1999, p. 30-33).

In the same year, western delegations travelled by train to the Fourth World Youth Meeting, held in Romania, via Hungary and Hegyeshalom. At the local station, the border guards and the reception committee welcomed the youngsters with great enthusiasm and joy<sup>40</sup>. Despite the Iron Curtain, there were still regular express trains between Budapest and Vienna. The summer timetable of 1954 shows that it was the only international express train from Budapest to the Western world, running four times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. On the other days of the week, it operated as a domestic train between Hegyeshalom and Budapest<sup>41</sup>.

On 14 May 1955, Hungary signed the Warsaw Pact, committing itself to the Soviet Bloc. Austria became a neutral state under the Austrian treaty ratified by the United States of America, Soviet Union, United Kingdom and France on 15 May 1955. Austria paid 150 million dollars as reparation and 25 million dollars in goods to the Soviet Union over six years. The Soviets, in turn, agreed to a complete withdrawal of its occupying forces.<sup>42</sup> This marked the beginning of a radically different economic and social development in Austria and a separation between the two world orders. Border traffic was abolished on 22 May 1955 on the Fertővidék HÉV (Lovas, 1998, p. 39).

Nevertheless, cross-border traffic on the Budapest-Hegyeshalom-Vienna line did not cease. In the new timetable, published on 22 May 1955, the Arlberg Express operated daily from Budapest to Vienna, Zurich, Basel, and Paris (except for Saturdays westwards and on Sundays eastwards)<sup>43</sup>. But even then, Hungarians returned from the West in regular trains under the amnesty decree and were greeted in Hegyeshalom by a reception committee and representatives of the World Association of Hungarians<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>40</sup> *Szabad Ifjúság*, 29 July 1953, 176. p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Budapest*, 20 May 1954, 118, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *GYSMH*, 17 May 1955, 114, pp. 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> *SZN*, 19 May 1955, 137, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> *SZN*, 21 December 1955, 299. p. 4.

Traffic was continuous through Hegyeshalom to the West, while border inspections became stricter. Often, trains were held in Hegyeshalom for three to four hours for passport inspections. In early 1956, the Hungarian authorities introduced a new system: passengers in group journeys were given a seat ticket and should travel only in the wagons reserved for them, which could not be boarded by domestic passengers. Foreigners' cars were inspected in Győr by ÁVH personnel with machine-guns, passport control staff, and electric reflectors at night. The same procedure was repeated at Hegyeshalom. From Győr to Hegyeshalom, the passports of passengers were checked on a list permits, which speeded border crossing<sup>45</sup>. Traffic on the line increased by the fact that since the summer of 1956 the exchange of goods between Austria and Yugoslavia occurred on the Kelebia-Budapest-Hegyeshalom line<sup>46</sup>.

Simultaneously, the four major powers stated that the obstacles to cooperation in international industry, agriculture, trade, science, technology, culture, and tourism should be gradually removed, to develop relations between the East and the West<sup>47</sup>. Hungary was also interested in attracting Austrian tourism and the subsequent inflow of foreign exchange (Zsiga, 1999, pp. 30-33).

In the autumn of 1956, as a token of the easing in the border guard, the pioneer units removed the technical border lock and the mines in the Győr-Moson-Sopron and Vas counties of the Austrian-Hungarian border<sup>48</sup>. Although this did not receive any serious publicity and strict border control continued to be exerted, the number of emigrants at the "green border" tripled. Any attempt to cross the border illegally was considered a political crime, which was sanctioned with long-term prison sentence. Guards fired at anyone who approached the border without permission. Therefore, anyone who intended to leave the country illegally through the "green border" risked death, injury, or imprisonment (Zsiga, 1999, p. 9-10).

In the summer of 1956, there was no indication of the Hungarian Uprising. The railway was preparing for the autumn peak traffic (due to the seasonal harvest), in addition to the rising export and import transportation<sup>49</sup>. GYSEV was modernising its rolling stock to meet the demand<sup>50</sup>. The improvement in diplomatic relations between Austria and Hungary became noticeable. The Chancellor of Austria, Julius Raab, noted that he trusted that the good historical relations between the two countries would be restored after the fall of the Iron Curtain<sup>51</sup>. Hungarian society, especially on the western territories, were tired of being unable to visit their relatives in Austria, which was often voiced in the press, hoping for further relief in border control<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> *Délamerikai Magyarorság* (South American Hungarians), 3 February 1956, 3775. p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *VM*, 29 May 1956, 125, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *GYSMH*, 1 November 1955, 257, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *VM*, 15 September 1956, 218, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *GYSMH*, 27 July 1956, 176, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> MNL-SL, VI. XXIV. 406. 45. box

<sup>51</sup> *SZN*, 9 September 1956, 250, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *N*, 15 October 1956, 287, p. 3.

## **4. The Iron Curtain rolling down again**

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### **4.1. Consequences of the Revolution of 1956 and the war of independence**

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The revolution and the war of independence that broke out on 23 October 1956 brought a radical turn in Hungary. On the border of Hegyeshalom, the movements became noticeable on 25 and 26 October, when Hungarian insurgents crossed the border to get medicine and food. At the same time, Austria began sending aid to Hungary and the Hungarian Red Cross created branches at all border train stations, such as Sopron, Hegyeshalom, and Szentgotthárd, to inform headquarters about the incoming shipments of aid.<sup>53</sup>

The border was open until 1 November when the Austrians re-introduced passport control<sup>54</sup>. These events made guarding the border an impossible task. Border guard personnel left the station during the Revolution. On 3 November 1956, an entire garrison of border guards in Sopron fled to Austria. Although under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1953, border patrols were still connected to the ÁVH (Gáspár, 2012, p. 42). Hungarian and Austrian passengers were free to alight the train and talk on the station platform in Sopron (Lovas, 1973, p. 19-20).

As a result of the Soviet counterattack, refugees filled the trains of GYSEV and MÁV to flee the country, including many of the crew members (Lovas, 2000, p. 369). Masses of refugees flooded from the countryside to the western border. On the Austrian side, refugee camps and direct trains from Mogersdorf, Nickelsdorf, and Baumgarten were waiting for the refugees and emigrants (Locsmándi, 2009, p. 147). In the weeks that followed, Sopron and Fertő became the most important places of the modern-day exodus of the Hungarian people.

The Soviet authorities closed the border between Mekszikópuszta and Pamhagen on 4 November (Lovas, 1998, p. 39). Austria did the same, suspending all train traffic. Nonetheless, the mass exodus continued unhindered until January 1957.

In December 1956, representatives of the socialist countries assembled in Budapest agreed to restart the international transit of passenger and freight. Traffic from the Soviet Union to Austria was temporarily diverted to Czechoslovakia<sup>55</sup>. On 27 November 1956, freight and passenger transit through Hegyeshalom was re-established<sup>56</sup>; on 13 December, between Szentgotthárd and Graz (also on the Sopron-Kőszeg HÉV and on the Wiener Neustadt-Sopron line)<sup>57</sup>; and, on 17 December, on the GYSEV line towards Ebenfurth (Lovas, 2000, p. 369).

By 1957, the situation in the country was normalized. A first sign of mobility restrictions was given by the cancellation of the Budapest-Vienna passenger train in January. The Arlberg Express resumed operation on the Paris-Zurich-Vienna-Hegyeshalom-

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<sup>53</sup> NA, 8 December 1956, 23, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> N, 18 November 1956, 12, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> N, 9 December 1956, 29, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> NA, 28 November 1958, 14, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> NA, 14 December 1956, 28, p. 4.



Budapest line on 4 February<sup>58</sup>, and the Orient Express restarted its travels on the Paris-Munich-Vienna-Hegyeshalom route on 29 April<sup>59</sup>. It continued to Budapest, but only until 1958, when the route westwards stopped at Vienna (until 1964). On 8 January 1957, the Hungarian government ordered strict border control, and on 24 January the technical border lock and the minefield were reinstalled. Neutral Austria became the border between the Western and the Eastern blocs (Lovas and Tóth, 1991, p. 230).



**Figure 3. The Iron Curtain**

Source: “The Iron Curtain Map”, in *Blog Curtain Gallery*, available in: <https://curtaingalleryz.blogspot.com/2019/09/the-iron-curtain-map.html>, downloaded on 14 September 2021

The reinstatement of the physical barrier at the frontier and the strict border control rendered travelling to Austria increasingly difficult. The border became a desertsic zone. However, illegal migration did not stop. Countless attempts to cross the border by train were made. These attempts were a political and financial burden to Austria<sup>60</sup>. What is more, the lack of coordination between voluntary aid organizations led to riots in the refugee camps<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> *Esti Hírlap* (Evening Newspaper), 1 February 1957, 26. p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Esti Hírlap*, 26 April 1957, 96, p. 5. Interview with József Kalocsai.

<sup>60</sup> *KA*, 17 January 1957, 13, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> *KA*, 10 January 1957, 7, p. 2.

The government granted amnesty to those illegal migrants returning to Hungary before 31 March 1957<sup>62</sup>, and many took the opportunity to return home by train via Hegyeshalom, Sopron, or Szentgotthárd<sup>63</sup>.

After 1957, the Hungarian Border Guard, which was under the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs (Gáspár, 2012, p. 45) increased its efficiency: the number of dissidents trying to cross the border decreased and the number of captures increased<sup>64</sup>. Travelling to the west required a passport; to get it, citizens had to apply at the passport department of the local police station and then at the Idegenforgalmi, Beszerzési, Utazási és Szállítási Vállalat (Touristic, Purchasing, Travel and Transportation Company), before getting it in Budapest together with the visa. It was only possible to travel to visit close relatives outside Hungary. The applicants could not pay the ticket using HUF; the close relative the applicant was to visit should transfer the same amount to the Hungarian National Bank in foreign currency<sup>65</sup>. In sum, travelling to the West became far more difficult<sup>66</sup>. The relationship between Austria and Hungary grew tense and a new phase of estrangement began.

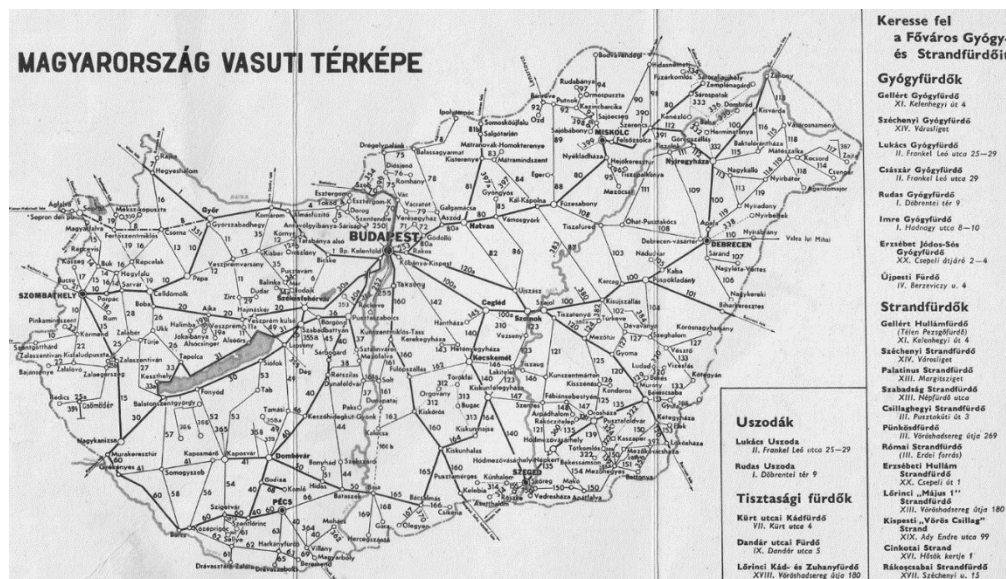


Figure 4. Railway map of Hungary in 1956

Source: “Magyarország Vasuti Térképe” (Railway Map of Hungary), in *Magyarország vasútállomásai és vasúti megállóhelyei* (Railway stations and railway stops in Hungary), available in: [vasutallomasok.hu/terk/mav1956.jpg](http://vasutallomasok.hu/terk/mav1956.jpg), downloaded on 14 September 2021)

<sup>62</sup> *Népsz.*, 2 April 1957, 77, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Fejér Megyei Hírlap* (Fejér County Newspaper), 5 March 1957, 53, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> *KA*, 13 January 1957, 10, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> *KA*, 21 February 1957, 43, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> *KA*, 8 March 1957, 56, p. 2.

This did not have an impact on the activity of GYSEV, though. From 1958 onwards, GYSEV increase its turnover substantially, as one of the most important routes between the East and the West<sup>67</sup>. Its Hungarian workers could only carry out their tasks on the other side of the border with a special permit.

Until the end of the 1980s, only one train was operating on the border crossing of the Fertővidék HÉV, departing from Fertőszentmiklós, carrying rail workers to Austria daily. The staff managed passenger trains (three trains a day between Neusiedl am See and Pamhagen) and freight trains. Apart from the train driver, none was allowed to talk to the Austrians. The staff travelled home in the evening, except for those who had to work in a shift the next day. They spent the night in a barracks in Pamhagen or Neusiedl am See Bad<sup>68</sup>.

## 5. Détente (Relaxation)

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### 5.1. Intensifying cross-border railway traffic

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Only in 1962 did Hungarian-Austrian diplomatic begin to improve (Locsmándi, 2009, p. 147). In 1963, the Austrian Railway Friends were allowed to travel on the Fertővidék HÉV line with a special temporary permit to bypass Lake Fertő by train. The Fertővidék HÉV line did not transport passengers across the border since 1955. The journey began in Vienna, then to Ebenfurth and Fertőszentmiklós, and back to the Austrian capital (Zwickl, 2011, p. 168). This was an isolated case. No similar initiatives were taken for a long time.

In 1965, following a proposal of the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist People's Party, the government eliminated the minefield on the Yugoslav and Austrian borders. At the same time, it ordered the introduction of a new technical solution to oversee the border. Additional measures taken in the 1960s (travel opportunities granted to Hungarian citizens abroad and abolition of visa requirements) made crossing the Austrian-Hungarian border easier and opened the border to Western tourists. Nevertheless, the border was still a sharp dividing line between the two countries (Rechnitzer, 1999, p. 84).

Rail traffic to the west recovered. Due to its geographical positioning, Hungary recovered the role of an important transit country. It served as a link between the East and the West, and the North and the South. There as a development of foreign trade between the Soviet Union and countries of Central and Southern Europe (Austria imported a significant share of raw material, Switzerland exported valuable commodities, and Italy and Yugoslavia expanded trade relation), and these flows traversed Hungary, thus increasing its relevance, and trade and railway revenues.

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<sup>67</sup> *N*, 23 October 1969, 247, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Gyula Nagy.

A significant part of these revenues came from rail transport in the MÁV and GYSEV lines (Szemere, 1965, 90-92). At the Austrian-Hungarian border, the railway traffic was declared in customhouses at Hegyeshalom, Sopron (towards Baumgarten and Loipersbach im Burgenland), Magyarfalva (Harka), Mekszikópuszta (Fertővidéki HÉV) and Szentgotthárd<sup>69</sup>. As for passenger transport, which also increased, in addition to the Orient Express, the Wiener Walzer train ran between the Vienna and Budapest via Hegyeshalom (Rödönyi, 1967, p. 288). To cope with the growing traffic, GYSEV invested in track improvements on both its Hungarian and Austrian sections<sup>70</sup>. The Fertővidéki HÉV favoured freight traffic from the Austrian territories that produced sugar beet (loaded at Wallern) to the sugar factory in Siegendorf. This route was allowed to operate under special permits, free of any charges and duties, due to its shorter extension and increased cost effectiveness. There was a daily shuttle train from Fertőszentmiklós to Pamhagen and Neusiedl am See and back. It was also possible to send consignments in the wagons. From Hungary, grain and acacia spikes were the main exports to Austria, whereas fertilizers, coal, wood, timber, and building materials were the main imports<sup>71</sup>. On the Szentgotthárd line, mainly scrap metal and logs were transported to Austria. The wagons were usually empty on their return<sup>72</sup>.

This trade was enhanced by the 1968 Soviet-Austrian Transit Tariff Committee Agreement that established direct rail freight transport between both nations and the establishment of Common Transit Tariff<sup>73</sup>. Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia also joined the agreement. Between 60% to 65% of railway freight<sup>74</sup> from the Soviet Union to Austria passed through Hungary<sup>75</sup>. However, at the same time, attempts to leave Hungary to the west on the “green road” or hiding in railway cars at Hegyeshalom were still noted<sup>76</sup>.

Due to the growing transit capacity of the GYSEV (that celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1969), the Hungarian and Austrian governments extended its concession for another 20 years<sup>77</sup>. About 80% of its staff was Hungarian. These were responsible for managing the traffic on the entire line. Austrian workers managed stations in Austria. Considering that GYSEV operated in both sides of the border (total line length was 217.4 km, 153.9 km of which in Hungary), it took an important role in the international transport system<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>69</sup> *Fejér Megyei Hírlap*, 30. March, 1966. vol. 75. p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> *Népsz*, 7 September 1966, 2111, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with István Németh.

<sup>73</sup> *N*, 4 July 1975, 155, p. 4.

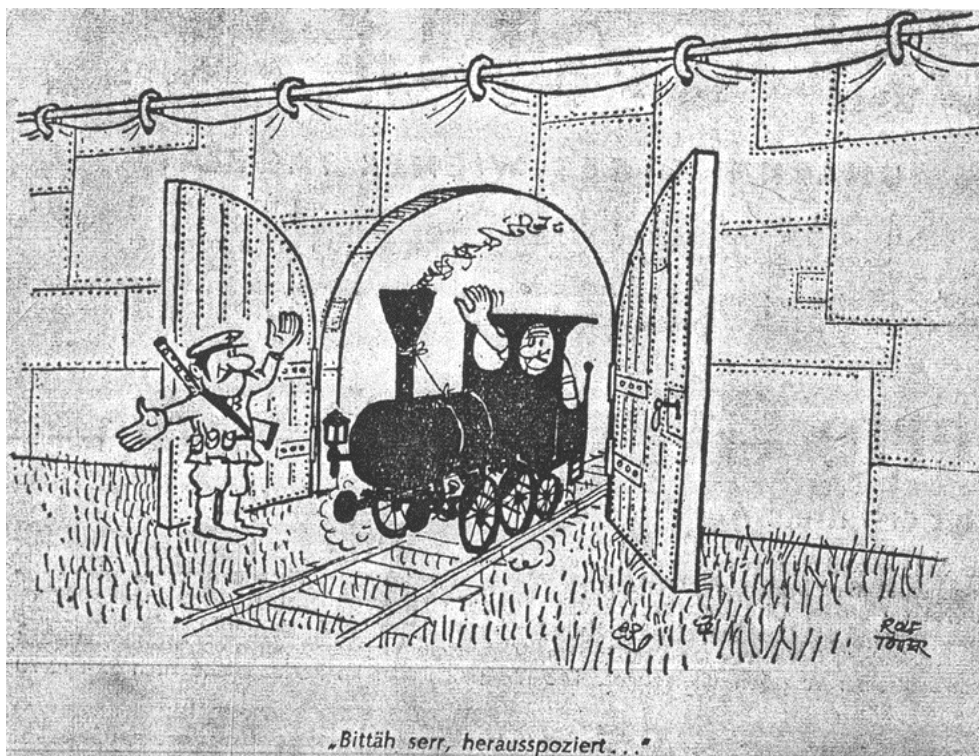
<sup>74</sup> Which included oil, coal, wood, pulp, fertilizer, potash, industrial wood, paper wood, aluminium scrap, crushed engines, and machinery. Interview with Gyula Nagy.

<sup>75</sup> *VG*, 5 July 1975, 127, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> *KA*, 27 January 1966, 22, p. 6; *Neues Österreich*, 5 August 1965, 123, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> *N*, 23 October 1969, 247, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Népsz*, 23, October 1969, 247, p. 204.



**Figure 5. A caricature of Antal Komláti’s defection from 1965. The caption translates to “Please, walk out”**

Source: *Neues Österreich*, 5 August, 1965, 123, p. 6

The development of traffic motivated new investments in the line. In Hegyeshalom, a new building was erected near the station, where the customs offices, the veterinary, and other services were placed<sup>79</sup>. The goal was to speed up trade between the two countries.

## **5.2. The period of the “gentle iron curtain”**

In 1970, an electrical signalling system at the border, apostrophised as a “gentle iron curtain”, was installed, replacing the shaft lock (Zsiga, 1999, pp. 43-54). The minefield was also removed, and the border area was abolished. Only a permit was required to enter the 7 km-border zone (Hardi, 1999, p. 163).

In accordance with the 1971 agreement between Hungary and Austria on passport and customs clearance, Austrian authorities were housed in the new border management buildings in the Hegyeshalom railway station, in the GYSEV railway station reception building in Sopron, in the Sopron South railway station warehouse building,

<sup>79</sup> KA, 5 September 1970, 208, p. 7.

and in the railway station in Szentgotthárd. The 1971 agreement it laid down the details for border and customs control, bearing in mind a flexible administration<sup>80</sup>.

In Szentgotthárd, on the 100th anniversary of the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd line, the new customs and railway social building (cost of three million HUF) was inaugurated. The section between Szentgotthárd and Máriaújfalu was renewed from 25 million HUF and opened for traffic<sup>81</sup>. Traffic in this line was not relevant, though. Although the Budapest-Szentgotthárd route linked to Graz, service to this service was not always available. At the border station, the *direct* car was coupled to an ÖBB passenger train<sup>82</sup>.

The Hungarian-Austrian border traffic talks (1972) promised further easing in transnational circulation. Representatives of MÁV, GYSEV, and ÖBB exchanged their views and experience<sup>83</sup>. During the proceedings, Raabersped (International Transportation Company of GYSEV) was created. It received the right to forward international containers freight (extended in 1984 to all kinds of freight forwarding)<sup>84</sup>. Meetings between Hungarian and Austrian railway managers and political leaders became more often in the following years<sup>85</sup>. For instance, in 1975, the conference of the Soviet-Austrian Transit Tariff Committee was held at the GYSEV's headquarters. There, Soviet, Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, and Czechoslovak railway experts discussed deepening cooperation in freight transport<sup>86</sup>.

In 1973, the ministers of Transport of Hungary and Austria, György Csanádi and Erwin Lang, signed the new statutes of GYSEV that could invest in tourism in both countries (it could build hotels and restaurants, expand its travel business, and open a travel agency)<sup>87</sup>. In 1976, the governments of Austria and Hungary extended GYSEV's operating license (it remained active until 2007)<sup>88</sup>.

When the reconstruction of the marshalling yard began in 1974, GYSEV started the construction of the new railway station of Sopron<sup>89</sup>. When the reconstruction of the Austrian part of the line was complete, in 1976, the new nine-track railway station was inaugurated in Sopron. It had enough capacity to serve the East-West transit traffic on a much higher scale. The company also built a customs warehousing centre next to the marshalling yard<sup>90</sup>. With an area of almost 40,000 m<sup>2</sup>, it became a duty-free zone that strongly favoured Hungarian exporting companies<sup>91</sup>. It enjoyed a monopolistic position, as it had a modern industrial distribution system, including a railway turntable. Shortly after, the volume of freight in Sopron rivalled that of Hegyeshalom<sup>92</sup>. The passenger

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<sup>80</sup> *Magyar Közlöny* (Hungarian Gazette), 29 June 1971, 49, pp. 609-610.

<sup>81</sup> *VN*, 22 September 1972, 228, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with István Németh.

<sup>83</sup> *N*, 28 October 1972, 255, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Népsz.*, 15 January 1984, 12, p. 152.

<sup>85</sup> *N*, 10 July 1973, 159, p. 8.

<sup>86</sup> *N*, 4 July 1975, 155, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> *N*, 17 November 1973, 269, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> *N*, 21 February 1976, 44, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Népsz.*, 22 May 1974, 117, 228.

<sup>90</sup> *N*, 7 April 1976, 83, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> *Népsz.*, 15 January 1984, 12, p. 152.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

building in the railway station was concluded in 1977. It was where border police and customs departments were stationed. It functioned as a common Hungarian-Austrian border station from that time<sup>93</sup>. In a separate room there was a waiting hall for foreigners<sup>94</sup>.

Besides GYSEV's main line, the Hegyeshalom-Nickelsdorf and Szentgotthárd-Mogersdorf sections also acted as international customs roads, but with a minor volume. The Sopron-Loipersbach im Burgenland maintained its function. In the case of the Baumgarten-Loipersbach im Burgenland-Sopron-Deutschkreutz line, only Austrian through traffic was allowed, while between Fertőújlak (the new name of Mekszikópuszta since 1976) and Pamhagen, only railway staff and escorts were allowed to travel<sup>95</sup>.

### 5.3. Growth of cross-border tourism

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Starting in the early 1970s, the easing in border control led to a growth of touristic travelling between Austria and Hungary. Holders of tourist passports could purchase tickets for airplanes, trains, or buses without special permission.

The new passport issuance system, introduced in 1972, facilitated travelling. With a fee of 150 HUF, the passport included five permits to exit the country. Besides individual journeys, it was possible participate in group travels organised by travel agencies. This option was easier for tourists, as all travel arrangements were provided by travel agents. Travellers were allowed to exchange up to 400 HUF per day or an annual limit of 8,000 HUF. If travelling to western countries, such as Austria, Hungarian tourists should apply for a currency transfer permit. The limit was set at 161 HUF (initially 70 HUF). To simplify the travels, those with tourist passports could purchase train tickets in HUF for the sections abroad<sup>96</sup>. The number of international trains grew. One famous train, the Orient Express, which had lost its originality and was in decline, made his last journey on 19 May 1977. The increase in air travel sealed the fate of the king of the trains, considered that by plane, the distance between Paris and Istanbul was 3 hours only.<sup>97</sup>

Since 1977, several "hobby trains" were created. Locomotives and cars from the nineteenth century ran from Vienna via the lines of GYSEV. The trains were given circulation order by ancient horns as it was customary in the nineteenth century. Rail workers wore ancient uniforms. The first "hobby trains" ran to Sopron and Nagycenk<sup>98</sup>. These services became very popular. In 1979 alone, tourists from 24 different nations used them to visit Hungary<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> *N*, 12 July 1977, 162, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> *Népsz*, 12 July 1977, 162, p. 97.

<sup>95</sup> *Magyar Közlöny*, 10 November 1976, 84, p. 999.

<sup>96</sup> *Magyar Hírlap*, 14 May 1975, 132, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> *Képes Újság*, 11 July 1981, 28, p. 11.

<sup>98</sup> *N*, 6 June 1977, 143, p. 14; *Népsz*, 19 June 1977, 143, p. 146.

<sup>99</sup> *N*, 11 October 1979, 238, p. 8.



**Figure 6. Nostalgic train route around Lake Fertő in 1979**

Source: Varga, 2017, p. 100

In 1978, the governments of the Hungarian People's Republic and the Republic of Austria signed an agreement to facilitate cross-border railway transit. The border crossing points were not altered, but traction and train escort service, among others, were expanded. Staff still required a passport, visa, and border crossing certificate. In some points, the border fence between the frontier and the station passed through the track with a sliding gate<sup>100</sup>! Legal force persisted, but further easing could no longer be controlled.

Most of the staff was Hungarian, and many of them – with different types of permits – were commuting to Austria. Most of the time, there was a good working

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with István Németh.



relationship – and even friendship – between Hungarian and Austrian employees. Workers in Austria had to learn German. Lessons were provided by the company on a weekly basis<sup>101</sup>. The lack of knowledge of German language since the 1960s became an increasing problem, especially for train drivers, who, by that time, had to be recruited from Baranya (Palotabozsok, Somberek) from the German minority living there. GYSEV valued its language-skilled and qualified workers and their families, for whom it provided not only work but also housing. Officials had a service passport kept in a safe, which could only be picked up in the afternoon of the eve of the scheduled departure and should be returned on the morning of the day after arrival. The staff had *Dienstauftrag* (border crossing card), which could be taken by the command for the duration of the service and then returned<sup>102</sup>.

At MÁV, it was different. After a thorough examination railway workers were given permits and they could go to Austria relatively easily, but not regularly. Some (like the track master, block master, track maintenance line commissioner, section engineer, and chief engineer) were required to undergo periodic safety checks. Engine drivers and train staff were not allowed to travel at all<sup>103</sup>. Communication with Austrian railwaymen was kept to a minimum<sup>104</sup>.

In the 1970s, the number of international passenger trains increased in the Budapest-Hegyeshalom-Vienna line. In 1979, the visa requirements to travel between Austria and Hungary were abolished, which significantly increased inbound traffic. The Lehár train<sup>105</sup> began operating between Austria and Budapest (Gittinger, 1990, p. 67).

In 1968, the Transport Policy Concept determined the termination of the unprofitable railways (Csanádi, 1968, p. 30) and the rerouting of part of the traffic to public roads. For those lines in the Hungarian peripheries that had low traffic this was a death sentence (Erdősi, 2009, pp. 5-6).

The section of the Fertővidéki HÉV between Fertőszentmiklós and Celldömölk was declared economically inefficient. Operation was terminated on 26 May 1979 (the track bed was removed after a few years). Stakeholders of the Fertővidék HÉV pondered wounding up the company. However, the Austrian branch of the company had just appointed new board members who convinced decisionmakers of GYSEV that it was worth buying and modernising the line (Lovas, 1998, pp. 40-41).

To increase tourism, the company, after the inauguration of the Lokomotiv Tourist Travel Agency in Sopron in 1976, opened a travel agency in Wulkaprodersdorf in 1981. The agency was responsible for historical trains, selling tickets, booking hotel rooms, organising cruises, and booking railway, boat, and theatre tickets<sup>106</sup>. The num-

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<sup>101</sup> *Szabad Föld*, 8 August 1984, 49, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with István Németh.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with József Kalocsai.

<sup>105</sup> Ferenc Lehár was a famous Hungarian composer.

<sup>106</sup> *VG*, 14 February 1981, 30, p. 3.

ber of Austrian tourists taking a day's journey on the GYSEV line, especially to Sopron, started to grow, because: it was cheaper than driving; tourists also took then opportunity to seek cheaper services in Hungary (meals, dentists, hairdressers, beauticians); and they did not need to bother about drinking a few glasses of wine in the famous Sopron wine region<sup>107</sup>.

The Hungarian population still suffered from travel restrictions that prevented visiting friends and relatives on the other side of the border. In the 1980s, contacts at a municipal level were established to promote cross-border mobility. The introduction of the world passport gave a major boost (Hardi, 1999, p. 165). The previously frosty Austrian-Hungarian relations to a large extent were melted.

The Győr-Sopron line was electrified in 1987, and, in 1988, GYSEV's sections Deutschkreutz-Ebenfurth and Pamhagen-Neusiedl am See joined the Eastern Region Transport Association (Verkehrsverbund Ost-Region) to harmonise the timetables and fares of buses, trams, and railways (Zwickl, 2011, p. 237). Consequently, there was an increase in the frequency of trains on the Sopron-Ebenfurth line to Vienna (one train per hour, instead of three trains per day) that was adjusted to those commuting to work and school<sup>108</sup>.

By the end of the Cold War era, passenger traffic in GYSEV lines had fallen to half, while the transport volume of goods had doubled, thanks to the logistics facilities provided by customs warehouses<sup>109</sup> GYSEV, that had been under the supervision of the state, continued to operate as a joint-stock company<sup>110</sup>.

Even before the demolition of the Iron Curtain, the idea of restoring the schedules between Pamhagen and Fertőszentmiklós (abolished in 1955), was pondered within the Fertővidéki HÉV<sup>111</sup>. Full restoration had to wait until 1990, when the Iron Curtain completely collapsed. Passenger trains resumed operation between Fertőszentmiklós and Neusiedl am See<sup>112</sup>.

By the end of 1985, the Szombathely-Szentgotthárd track was modernised.<sup>113</sup> As traffic was low, second-hand sleepers and rails were used and trains could only travel at 60 km/h. There was a regular direct service between Szombathely and Graz since 1985. The line operated at low capacity, due to the high number of transfers and the slow pace.

This example illustrates that Hungary was enhancing its transport to the east; therefore its western neighbours did not seek to implement any innovation to the east either<sup>114</sup>. In 1989, the Liszt Ferenc Eurocity train began to operate on the Budapest-Vienna-Frankfurt am Main-Cologne-Dortmund line as another sign of the opening to the West (Gittinger, 1990, p. 67).

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<sup>107</sup> *Amerikai–Kanadai Magyar Élet*, 5 March 1983, 9, p. 18.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán.

<sup>109</sup> *N*, 12 July 1986, 163, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Népsz.*, 4 March 1991, 53, p. 8.

<sup>111</sup> *VG*, 22 April 1989, 75, p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> *N*, 30 May 1990, 125, p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> *VN*, 21 November 1985, 273, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> *VN*, 23 May 1990, 119, p. 1.

#### **5.4. Smuggling, illegal migration**

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Smuggling could not be stopped even under the strictest controls of the communist regime. There were strict (canine) inspections on both MÁV and GYSEV lines.

On the Hegyeshalom line, railway workers looted the incoming and outgoing trains, mostly those carrying food (for example, wine transports from the Eger wine region), but they also smuggled goods<sup>115</sup>. Among other things, the most wanted products were anoraks, food (especially citrus fruits), coffee, nylon stockings, housecoats, dresses, sewing material, *Fa* soap, shower gel, and calculators. The employees of GYSEV had wide opportunity for smuggling, as they regularly travelled to Austria. They called it the “smuggling gate of Hungary”.

Such products that were not available in the Hungarian market were smuggled by the railwaymen. If they did not mount to high quantities, they were ignored by the border guards. Most often, passengers brought Soviet champagne (Sovietskoje Igristoje), Pick salami, blocks of cheese, and loin-chop to the neighbouring country, where they were sold. Human smuggling was also present throughout the Cold War period<sup>116</sup>.

#### **5.5. The disintegration of the Eastern bloc: reopening the borders**

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In the 1990s, the crisis of the socialist system had become increasingly visible. The national and international problems of the Soviet Union were augmenting. The new general-secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, recognized that the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union could no longer be sustained. In the case of Eastern European countries, he envisioned laying the existing relations on a democratic foundation and he did not stand in the way of transformation. This led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, to the end of the Cold War, and to a shift in the Hungarian political regime (Fischer, 1992, p. 337-344).

But even before that, some facilitations in crossing the border were noticeable. As mentioned before, the world passport was introduced in 1987 and the border was opened in 1988. After 1989, signalling equipment, barbed wire, and strict border patrolling disappeared, and border crossings were opened to the West. Since 1994, Austria's eastern border was also the border of the European Union. In 2004, Hungary joined the European Union as well. With the mitigation of the role of borders, the formation of cross-border, integrated, and cohesive regions began (Hardi, 1999, p. 164).

#### **6. Conclusion**

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The two railway companies in Hungary, MÁV and GYSEV, took separate paths after Trianon, World War II, and the unveiling of the Iron Curtain.

MÁV operated the Budapest-Győr-Hegyeshalom line, which was considered the main railway of the country, providing a direct connection with Vienna. Passenger and

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<sup>115</sup> Interview with József Kalocsai.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Gyula Nagy.

freight were of enormous importance. Transit in the line continued during the period I analysed, but there was strict control and rolling stock change at the border, thus minimising illegal emigration and smuggling. The importance of the line was enhanced by the international trains running on it.

Its other line handled much less traffic through Szombathely to Szentgotthárd (and from here to Graz). On this line, even a sliding gate was set at the border, thus covering the leak on the Iron Curtain caused by the railway track. Despite strict measures and control, smuggling and illegal emigration could not be stopped. In 1949 and from 1956, both these tracks contributed to open the hermetic Iron Curtain towards the Western world.

The GYSEV and the Fertővidéki HÉV under its management were also exceptional within the Eastern bloc, as they were property not only of two countries, but also of two different political blocs. In this sense, it played a connecting role between the two sides of the border. The company tried to take advantage of this situation through continuous improvements. The special condition of the railway and GYSEV provided unique opportunity for illegal border crossing and smuggling. In the 1970s and 80s, the Hungarian employees working in Austria, who often found themselves confused, while walking without restrictions, buying local products on Vienna's streets, and bringing them home, were able to smuggle foreign goods after the ease of border controls.

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## **Interviews**

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Based on an interview with József Kalocsai, Chief Commercial Officer of the MÁV Győr Plant Administration between 1980 and 1986, on 21 April 2020 (owned by the author)

Interview with Dr. Tibor Józán, Deputy CEO of GYSEV, retired in 2007, on 15 December 2017 in Sopron (owned by the author).

Interview with Gyula Nagy, retired, who worked at GYSEV since 1971 as a train brakeman on the Austrian line of the Fertővidéki HÉV, and then as a train receiver in Ebenfurt for 25 years, on 15 December 2017 (owned by the author)

Interview with István Németh, head of the MÁV Szombathely Board of Directors between 1989 and 2004, on 20 April 2020 (owned by the author)

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