

Trains to Holland

Gábor Pusztai

Between 1920 and 1930, more than 60,000 Hungarian children were able to recover during a holiday in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and England as part of the Hungarian child rescue operation after the First World War. Most of the children, more than 28,000, went to Dutch foster parents. In addition to the Hungarian organizers, the Kuyper sisters and the Dutch Consul General in Budapest, Jan Clinge Fledderus, played a key role in this humanitarian action. The action not only meant change for the children, but it also changed the relationship between the two countries. Between the two world wars, the relationship between Hungary and the Netherlands became closer in the field of trade, economy, culture, literature, and tourism. In addition, Hungary had a political motivation for this humanitarian action. After the First World War, Hungary became internationally isolated and therefore sought breakout points. The child rescue operation provided a political opportunity to present the poor Hungarian children, like thousands and thousands of little diplomats, who showed the miserable Hungarian destiny, the poverty and hunger with their mere presence. In this way millions of Western Europeans could get to know the situation in Hungary directly. After World War II, a similar but smaller-scale and shorter-lasting child rescue operation took place. It can be stated that also in this case the action took on a political dimension, in addition to its humanitarian and social aspects. At the beginning of the Cold War, political parties in Hungary fought a determined election campaign with each other, which included the „children’s trains” too. The cessation of the action in January 1949 marked the beginning of a new era in Hungary. The Communist Party took over power with Soviet help, established the Stalinist dictatorship in Hungary and suppressed its political opponents, including the churches. After the child rescue action no longer had a political stake and the Communists had gained power, they also banned the children’s holiday travels abroad (altogether). The majority of those who had travelled with the “children’s trains” in Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands or Belgium for a long time, often kept in touch with their foreign foster parents or their children after them, for the rest of their lives.