

A Review Article:

J. Peters: “A Loyal Party Functionary”

Lee Congdon

Thomas Sakmyster. *Red Conspirator: J. Peters and the American Communist Underground*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 251 pages. \$50.00.

In 1949, Noel Field, American communist and Soviet agent, found himself at the center of the Show (or “Conceptual”) Trial of László Rajk and his “accomplices.” It had not occurred to him, when he defected to Prague, that Czechoslovak authorities would turn him over to the Hungarians, who, knowing of his U.S. government service, could claim they had “unmasked” him as an intelligence agent and recruiter of Hungarian “traitors.” The role that Field was forced to play in the first major Show Trial in Eastern Europe was, as Thomas Sakmyster has pointed out in these pages, not the only connection between Hungarian and U.S. communism.¹ In this superb study of a highly significant link, he tells the fascinating story of a Hungarian-born communist who became a leading actor in the historical drama of the CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America).

Sándor Goldberger was born in 1894 in Csap, Hungary (now Ukraine). His parents were Jews, very likely assimilated. “Very likely” is the most one can say about many events and circumstances in the life of this notorious “man of mystery.” Sakmyster has set a high standard for investigative researchers—having examined papers in the National Archives, the Hungarian National Archives, and the Budapest Institute of Political Science, Comintern records, FBI files, INS files, and many other sources — but even after exhaustive research, he has often had to resort to (disciplined) speculation. On page 73, for example, he found it necessary to qualify statements with words such as “doubtless,” “apparently,” “perhaps,” and “likely.”

We can say with confidence that Goldberger graduated — probably in 1912 — from *Gymnasium*, but “almost nothing is known” of his life during the eight years of his attendance (p. 3). In 1913, he enrolled in the Law College in Kolozsvár and completed three semesters before being called to arms in June 1914. About his years in uniform (1914-1918) we know only that he survived as an officer on the Italian front. Shortly after returning to civilian life, he joined the newly-formed Hungarian Communist Party. Why, we do not know for certain, but we do know that he never looked back, never wavered in his faith in communism or loyalty to the Party.

Nor do we know why, in 1924, Goldberger, along with his mother and older brother, emigrated to the United States. Sakmyster suggests, reasonably enough, that he was looking for a larger stage on which to act on the Party’s behalf and that he was alarmed by the growth of anti-Semitism in postwar Hungary — although Csap (Cop) was then under Czechoslovak rule. Having arrived in the States, Goldberger enrolled in night school to learn English and introduced himself to the Hungarian Federation of the Workers Party of America (the name used by the CPUSA from late 1921 to 1929). From then until 1949, when he returned to Hungary, he served the CPUSA and its Soviet masters in a number of capacities.

Having decided to adopt an alias, Goldberger began to call himself József Péter, and later Joe Peter, J. Peter, and eventually J. Peters. From the beginning, Peters’ strong suit was organization; in 1935 he wrote *The Communist Party: A Manual on Organization*. Not exactly a stirring piece of writing, the manual did serve to remind comrades that “one form of organization is suitable for legal existence of the Party, and another for the conditions of underground, illegal existence.”² Peters involved himself in both open and covert activities, but it was in the latter that he demonstrated the greatest effectiveness.

That the CPUSA operated underground and engaged in illegal activities, including espionage, has been demonstrated conclusively only recently, thanks in no small measure to the work of Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes.³ As late as the 1980s and 1990s, as Sakmyster points out, “most historians of the American Communist Party evinced little interest in alleged underground or espionage activities of American Communists” (p. xvi). For reasons of their own, these revisionist historians insisted upon characterizing the Party as a legal organization, admittedly radical in nature, fighting for workers and minorities.⁴ It followed, of course, that Whittaker Chambers, who had worked closely with Peters, had lied and that Alger Hiss was innocent, fictions that diehards continue to treat as facts.

As Sakmyster notes, it was the renewal of interest in the Chambers-Hiss controversy (following the 1978 publication of Allen Weinstein’s *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*) that sparked fresh interest in Peters’ career. It had been Chambers, though he liked Peters personally, who first alerted American authorities to the Hungarian’s importance; in *Witness* (1952), his moving autobiography/memoir, he described Peters as the “head of the entire underground section of the American Communist Party. As such, he was one of the two or three most powerful men in the party.”⁵

Although Peters vehemently denied Chambers’s charges, Sakmyster discovered a memoir that Peters wrote in the 1980s and deposited in the archives of what was then the Budapest Institute of the [Hungarian] Communist Party. In it he admitted that he had been “deeply involved in clandestine or underground operations” (p. xix). Based upon this memoir and other valuable sources, Sakmyster provides many details concerning Peters’ multifarious activities, including his fraudulent passport operation, cadre building, and work as liaison between the CPUSA and Soviet intelligence agencies — OMS (the Comintern’s International Liaison Section), GRU (Soviet military intelligence), and NKVD (Soviet political police).

Just as important was his supervising of communists and fellow travelers who had infiltrated government agencies. Among them was Hiss, close friend of Noel Field and member of Peters’ Washington DC “Apparatus B” (“Apparatus A” was the so-called “[Harold] Ware Group”). That Peters “could place agents in ‘old-line agencies’” such as the State Department was, Sakmyster rightly observes, no small achievement.

Always preferring to remain in the shadows, Peters was nonetheless ubiquitous during the 1930s. Only when Chambers broke with the Party in 1938 did he think it advisable to withdraw from illegal work, go underground, and assume yet another alias: Alexander Stevens. That at least was the name he used during the years when he was engaged in a cat and mouse game with a government determined to produce evidence of law breaking. When he cautiously returned to Party work during World War II, he called himself “Steve Miller,” though publicly he kept the name “Stevens.” In 1947, the FBI discovered, quite by accident, that Stevens had used the name “Isadore Boorstein” on a passport under which he had traveled to and from the Soviet Union in 1931-32 — a clear violation of the 1924 Immigration Act.

While at a deportation hearing in 1948, Stevens was served with a subpoena to appear before HUAC (House Committee on Un-American Activities). At *that* hearing Chambers identified him as J. Peters. Naturally, Peters pled the Fifth to most of the Committee’s questions. He did the same before the grand jury looking into allegations of perjury on the part of Alger

Hiss. Nevertheless, the CPUSA did not welcome the publicity and ordered Peters to leave the United States voluntarily, and as soon as possible. Ever obedient, he signaled to the authorities his desire to return to Hungary, the country of his birth.

Late in May 1949, József Péter, as he would be known for the remainder of his life, arrived in Budapest. Within days, he learned that László Rajk had been arrested, and no doubt feared that, as someone who had lived in the U. S. for years, he too would be caught up in the terror. For some reason, however, he managed to avoid arrest and settled into a new life as an editor and expert on America; unlike so many of the Party faithful, he died of natural causes at age 96. “Nothing,” Sakmyster concludes, “is known of the last few years of József Péter’s life or of his reaction... to the collapse of the Communist regimes in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe in 1989” (p. 180). A “man of mystery” he remained, but one thing is certain: He was, in his own words, “a loyal Party functionary” to the end.

NOTES

¹ See Thomas Sakmyster, “Mátyás Rákosi, the Rajk Trial, and the American Communist Party,” *Hungarian Studies Review* 38, 1-2 (2011): 45-68.

² See *The Communist Party: A Manual on Organization*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1935/07/organisers-manual/index.htm>.

³ See especially Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁴ In this regard, see also Lee Congdon, “Anti-Anti-Communism,” *Academic Questions* 1, 3 (1988), 42-54.

⁵ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), 309.