

# HITTUDOMÁNYI RECENZIÓK

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HEROES AMONG US

**Reviewed book: Czókos Gergely – Kiss Réka – Máthé Áron – Szalai Zoltán (eds.): *Heroes Among Us – 50 True Stories of Brave Hungarians in the 20th Century*, Budapest, Open Books Publishing, 2021. ISBN: 9789635720002 319 pp.**

When I first held the book in my hands, I immediately thought that this work would surely be about the victims of communism, and this is why reason the colour red was chosen for the cover, and also the dominant colour of the interior of the book. However, the very first story, the tragedy of *Gáspár Alapy* (who died in the Dachau concentration camp), revealed a much more astonishing fact. The cover of the book and that found throughout the volume reflects the blood of the martyrs. The dictatorships that emerged in 20-th century Hungarian amid domestic and foreign political turmoil shed much innocent blood. There are those who would have merited celebration for their anti-Nazi resistance, yet the Soviet-type communist regime tried to brutally break. Such is the story of *Zoltán Benkő*, who took part in the national anti-Nazi resistance. During World War II, he was involved in the bombing of the statue of Gyula Gömbös (a pro-German politician). For a short time, he hid the explosives under his mother's sofa. Later, during his interrogation, an officer accused him of fascism, and when Benkő defended himself with the story above, the argument was that "anyone who had been able to blow things up in 1944 could blow things up after 1945."

In addition, to the horrors of the Second World War, the Hungarian people also had to live through the sudden change from one dictatorship to another. It is generally accepted that 1945 was another watershed in Hungarian history. The communist regime used physical coercion or psychological terror to remove potential political opponents from the political arena. In addition, Soviet-style communism did not represent the very people it purported to be champions of but persecuted and exploited its own people. One of the greatest sins of the system was to pit father and son against each other within a family, doing so when it created a sense of shame and guilt for supposed sins against the regime and its ideology. For a long time the violence and injustice suffered were not allowed to be spoken of, even within a family. However, the wounds of the past cannot be healed by the passage of time alone, they need to be talked about. *Heroes Among Us* wants to honour the memory of individuals who have been undeservedly forgotten. For example, *Géza Soos* had the astounding fearlessness to steal a plane

with Nazi insignia to deliver the Auschwitz Protocols (or Vrba-Wetzler report) to the US Army in Italy and try to prevent the siege of Budapest. He was later forced to leave the country in 1946 due to communist persecution.

The work is difficult to read, but this is not the fault of the authors or the editors. Each life story is a world of its own, in which one can imagine oneself, trying to understand the motivations and thoughts of the protagonists of the story. The endings are often shocking, and it is difficult to digest the unanswerable questions. In my opinion, this book is not a "fast-read". If someone is interested in the martyrs of 20-th century Hungarian and wants to get to know the faces of the everyday heroes of anti-dictatorial resistance, I suggest reading one chapter per day for fifty days.

It is not easy to say what these fifty individuals have in common. They came from very different social situations, different professions, and careers, and were not all persecuted or humiliated to the same degree. What perhaps unites all of them, however, and why it is worth putting all fifty of them side by side, is that they were Hungarians, they loved their homeland and they desired to protect it from oppressive dictatorships.

While reading, one can also sense a kind of intention on the part of the authors: these heroes did not suffer alone, but each of them had a family, a community of friends, or a congregation standing beside them. For example, Reverend *Lajos Gulyás* (who was involved in a local National Council during the 1956 Revolution) was absolutely convinced of his innocence as he did not do anything unlawful, and he also saved a communist police officer from lynching. At the time of his arrest, he was celebrating his 39th birthday. He said goodbye to his three daughters, whom he never saw again as he was sentenced to death and executed by the communist state.

By its very nature, dictatorship does not tolerate any kind of counter-opinion. It does not think about morality or religion outside of its ideology. We can find two striking examples of this. First, *György Krassó* was like a "stuntman" or "an eternal revolutionary" as the chapter's title refers to him. He produced thousands of pamphlets about the oppressive regime, and then he took part in the siege of the Hungarian Radio station in the Revolution of 1956 (for which he was sentenced to ten years in prison). In the 80's he held illegal celebrations of the 1956 Uprising. Father *Placid Oloffson* repeatedly spoke out against communism and condemned all armed struggles. Nonetheless the Soviet court accused him of: "inciting the audience in his

speeches to commit massacres." He was then innocently sent to a Gulag in the Soviet Union for almost ten years.

The book contains fifty names of people, examples of bravery, as the title declares. It reminds me of an ancient, iconic story from the pages of the Bible. Before the destruction of Sodom, God said: "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake" (Gen 18:26) One of the most important guarantees of Hungary's rise, of the nation's revival, was that there were at least fifty righteous and courageous people (and many more) who would not compromise with the oppressive regime and who took the risks that came with it. Some of them were even offered great opportunities, for instance study trips and leadership positions. As an example, the communist regime wanted to win physicist *Zoltán Bay* over "using the proverbial carrot and stick", but after he saw the sabotage operations against his colleagues, alleged "reactionary forces", he had to flee the country.

The book is so important to our nation that President János Áder presented it to Pope Francis during a visit to Hungary. The Hungarian fate has often been an oppressed fate, like that of early Christianity, or of today's persecuted Christianity. And in connection with this, we can find pastors, priests, bishops, and clergyman from almost all denominations who were attacked and humiliated. These brave people were also like "those whom the world did not deserve." (Hebrews 11:38) Furthermore, this volume also indicates that our present age must face the sins of the past and decry the curse of evil again and again. At the same time, there were predecessors of whom the Hungarian people can be proud, and who set an example for us in times of need. They were the heroes who are still among us today.

This book describes fifty people who "must be known". At the same time, it is clear that many stories like theirs can be learned from recent research, so I hope future volumes will be born.