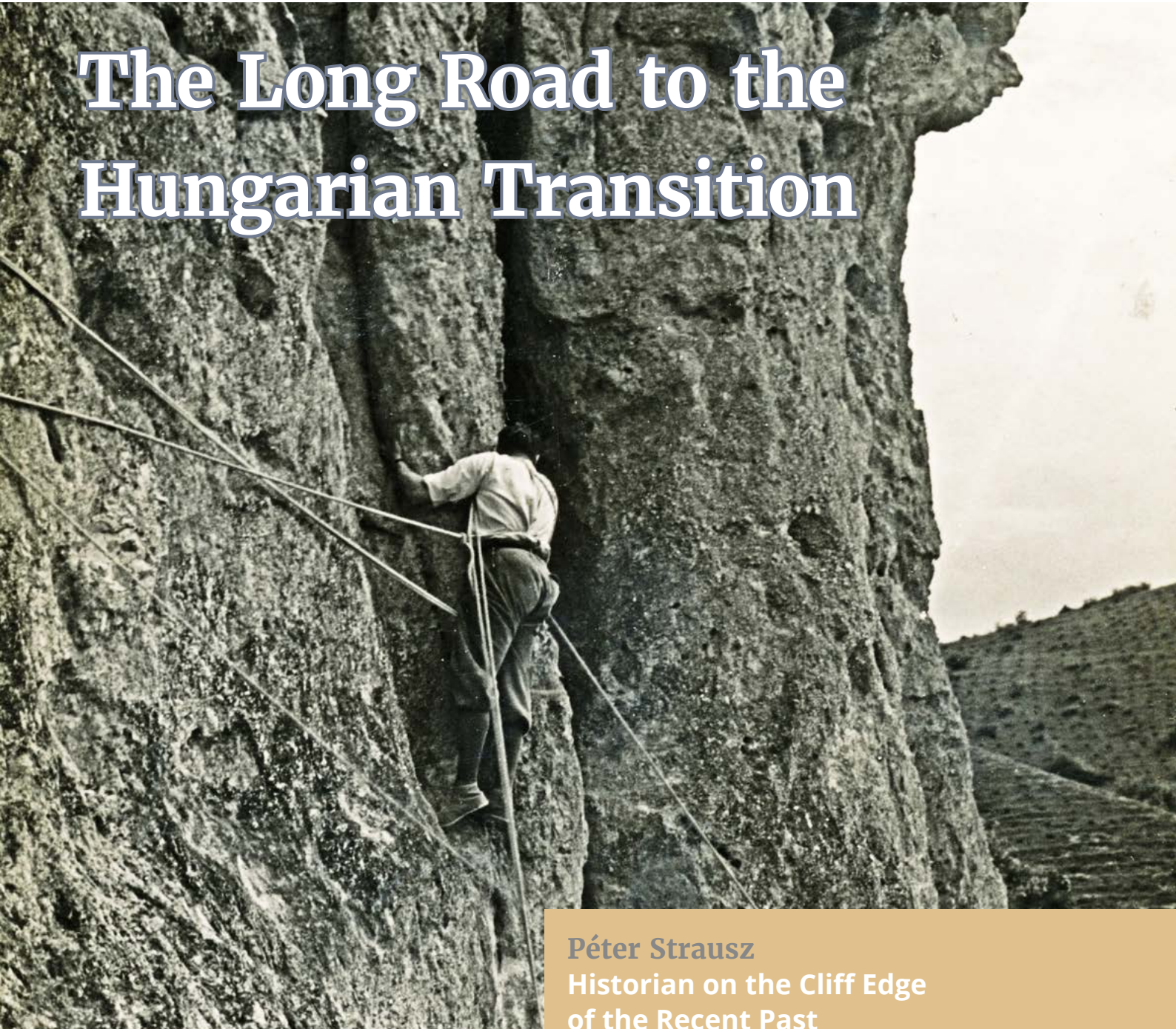


# RENDSZERVÁLTÓ SZEMLE HUNGARIAN REGIME CHANGE STUDIES

JOURNAL OF THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND ARCHIVES FOR THE HISTORY OF THE  
HUNGARIAN REGIME CHANGE

Issue 4 | 2025

## The Long Road to the Hungarian Transition



**Péter Strausz**  
Historian on the Cliff Edge  
of the Recent Past

**Dániel Havasi**  
Interview with Gábor Nyári

**Barnabás Pálinkás**  
The Precursors of the Tuszványos Camp

## RETÖRK!

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Cover image: Pilisszentiván, Hungary, 1929. Fortepan / Ákos Schermann, 95784

## RENDSZERVÁLTÓ SZEMLE HUNGARIAN REGIME CHANGE STUDIES

Peer-reviewed journal.

Publisher:

Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató  
Intézet és Levéltár Nonprofit Közhasznú Kft.

Responsible publisher:

Gábor Nyári

Place of publication:

6065 Lakitelek, Szentkirályi út 4.

Editor in chief:

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Printing: Tama Solutions Kft.

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Free publication. Published quarterly.

HU ISSN 2732–379X (print)

HU ISSN 2939–5496 (online)

The publication of the journal is supported by Magyar Kulturáért Alapítvány, Petőfi Kulturális Ügynökség, and Nemzeti Kulturális Alap.



**FOREWORD**

The most recent issue of *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, titled *Helsinki, 1975*, explored the importance of the civil struggles that were indispensable to the fall of the dictatorial communist regimes. Even as that issue went to press, Hungary was assuming the rotating presidency of the Visegrád Group (V4), a role it will hold for the one-year period from 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026. The publication of the present issue, which the esteemed reader now holds in his or her hands, falls very close to the forthcoming 35th anniversary of the establishment of the Visegrád Group, which was concluded on 15 February 1991. We consider it important to highlight this, as the Central European countries liberated by the fall of communism looked to the future together from the very first moments of their political transformation – and could do so upon the exceptionally rare foundation of significant historical precedents reaching deep into their past, even as far back as the 1335 meeting of the kings at Visegrád, now 690 years ago. As we observe the increasingly evident erosion of the world system that emerged after the First World War – an erosion that intensified as we approached the millennium – and as we take in the bewildering and often astonishing effects of the systemic global changes unfolding today, we may at least find grounds for confidence in the fact that the peoples of Central Europe can rely on enduring historical ties. A distinctly ‘European-minded’ way of thinking was an organic component and driving force behind the struggles and the determination to act for historical justice, manifested in forms ranging from constructive criticism to armed resistance in those countries forced into the straitjacket of communist rule. We often wish to present these struggles as a single, unified process, as though they formed one continuous chain, but it seems far from certain that the actors, causes, and events can be mapped as a perfectly interconnected sequence.

Nevertheless, our history presupposes points of connection – perhaps more densely in Europe, and within it Central Europe, than elsewhere on the globe. With this special English-language edition, our aim is to present the work of the Institute and Archives for the Research of the History of the Hungarian Regime Change (RETÖRKI), and the research of its colleagues, in the hope that it may offer a valuable and meaningful opportunity to deepen our scientific and cultural relations in their many international dimensions.



András László Riba

Director for Archives and Professional Development,  
Chair of the Editorial Board

Péter Strausz

# Historian on the Cliff Edge of the Recent Past

## Reflections on the Scholarly Study of the Hungarian Regime Change



National communities, whether consciously or unconsciously – one might even say instinctively – are usually aware, deep in their bones, when a decisive turning point is approaching in their collective life. This realization may not be articulated immediately or in parallel with the unfolding events, especially when the effects of the change are only felt by much of society somewhat later. Yet even a recognition that dawns only years afterward, when viewed in historical perspective, can be regarded as virtually simultaneous with the events themselves. All of this naturally gives rise, in both narrower and broader circles within the community, to a need for understanding and interpretation. What exactly happened to us? And why, and how? Who played what role in shaping our fate? Who deserves credit, or who is to blame? For many, these are the sorts of questions that arise. And once the questions are posed, answers soon begin to be put forward, embarking on a struggle – sometimes lasting decades – to become the exclusive, or at least the canonized, interpretation.

This may be regarded as a natural phenomenon, a process in which many groups and community members, whether

by virtue of their profession or simply as citizens, take part and make their voices heard. It is likewise common that the discipline of history is only one among several actors engaged in the challenge (and indeed contest) of understanding and interpretation, and its voice does not automatically carry farther than the voices of others. This is not merely because, by the nature of its approach and its traditional modes of expression – source publications, scholarly works, academic lectures – it can count on a more limited primary audience. It is also because, if it takes itself and the demands of the discipline seriously, it is, in a sense, if one may put it this way, always running behind the other actors. Scholarly inquiry and the formation of well-grounded judgments require far more time than attempting to interpret the past based on sentiment or a passing interest. A further difficulty is that the historian works with historical sources, primarily written ones, which in the short or even medium term after the events may either not be available at all or may be accessible only to a degree insufficient to arrive at a broad, coherent picture. And as though this were not enough, the historian must also strive to preserve the realistic maximum of objectivity and to

formulate and publish scholarly findings in such a way that they do not become ammunition for interest-driven political or public disputes, but rather – if I may say so without any false pathos – serve not only scholarly understanding but also strengthen and refine the national community's identity through the clarifying and, when necessary, nuancing effort to understand our shared past, carried out with attention to as many perspectives as possible. In this respect, historical scholarship walks a narrow ledge: on one side rises the sheer rock face of the communal life-question to be understood and the difficulties of research; on the other yawns the abyss of unprofessionalism. Nor may historians call out loudly the message they bring, lest they trigger a destructive avalanche. They can do nothing but proceed, like experienced mountaineers, at their own pace, continually weighing possibilities, limitations, and the strength they have at their disposal.

In the reinterpretation of past events, the intellectual – and at times distinctly *un-intellectual* – struggle and competition to shape narratives began in Hungary, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, after the regime change of

1989–90. Even as the ruling party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP), began to undergo gradual erosion in 1988–89, narratives emerged that sought to interpret the very processes then unfolding – processes that would later collectively be labelled the 'regime change'. And following the first free parliamentary elections after the end of the socialist period, in May 1990, this urge to place the events and moments of the previous few years into one narrative framework or another resurfaced repeatedly in parliamentary life, political discourse, and government work. Indeed, the opening sentences of *The Programme of National Renewal* – drawn up by the coalition government led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum, a party that grew out of the reform movement and won the largest share of the vote, with József Antall as prime minister – also offered an interpretation of the transition: 'A revolution has taken place in Hungary. A slow, peaceful, "tired revolution" that had been in preparation for a long time, and whose goal is to lead us from "state" to homeland.' The introduction to the government programme set out the main stages of this process, conceived as a longer development: beginning in the mid-1980s with the meetings of various groups of 'dissidents'; the civil-oppositional protests and demonstrations of 1988 against the environmentally damaging hydroelectric project planned on the Hungarian–Czechoslovak border, and against Romanian

plans to destroy primarily Hungarian-inhabited villages in Transylvania. The following year came the first free commemoration of the revolutionary events of 15 March 1848; the solemn reburial of Imre Nagy, the executed prime minister, and his fellow martyrs – which effectively rehabilitated the anti-Soviet, anti-dictatorial revolution of 1956 and thereby nullified the legitimacy of the regime re-established after 1956; and then, on 23 October (the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution), the proclamation of the republic, abolishing the communist people's republic. According to the document, this process culminated in the free elections of 1990 and the assumption of office by the newly formed government.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis naturally also signalled who were to be regarded as the true active (and positive) agents of regime change: the members of the groups organized around oppositional thought – the revolutionaries of the 'tired revolution'.

Those who had stood on the opposite side of the 'revolutionary barricade' during the regime change held a markedly different view from the one outlined above. Miklós Németh, the slowly outgoing last prime minister of the previous era, spoke about their own role in the transition at the first sitting of the newly elected free parliament on 2 May 1990. He put it this way: 'We, the members of the government, knew the role the government

had been assigned in the peaceful transformation of the system, and we wanted with all our strength to fulfil that role. That is why we have spent the past almost year and a half working hard. Many believed that we had committed political suicide, since as the result of our struggle to dismantle the old power structure, we ourselves were ultimately pushed out of executive power. I say that nothing demonstrates more clearly that in working for the regime change we were not seeking to preserve our own power in some altered form, but to ensure that we could live in a parliamentary democracy. We fought our constitutional revolution in such a way that not only did the masses refuse to go on living in the old way, but those in power no longer wished to govern in the old way. We worked selflessly for these changes.'<sup>2</sup>

With these two early interpretations of the regime change, my intention has merely been to illustrate how markedly different approaches, and thus assessments, appeared in public life almost simultaneously with the events themselves. Were this the aim of the present essay, one could go on to dissect the positions and evaluations of the various parties, groups, and prominent figures situated on different poles of political and public life. It is scarcely surprising that amid this chorus – at times verging on cacophony – one could hardly find a single historian who spoke in the key or from the score of his profession.

<sup>1</sup> For the quote and the moments of the regime change that were declared important, see: *A Nemzeti Megújulás Programja – A Köztársaság első három éve*. Budapest, 1990, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Prime Minister Miklós Németh at the session of parliament on 2 May 1990. The text of the diary can be found on the official website of the Hungarian Parliament. <https://www.parlament.hu/naplo34/001/0010027.htm> (Accessed: 18 November 2025.)

Far more often it was political actors, public figures, or at most political scientists who expressed themselves on the subject of the regime change, typically those who had themselves participated in the process and thus had a personal – and, it must be added, in that immediate present often a politically interested – relationship to the events. This, understandably, did little to enhance the prospects of forming an objective assessment of the regime change.

Within the national community, however, there existed from the outset, to a greater or lesser degree, a desire to gain clarity about what had happened to it, perhaps without its say-so?, from the second half of the 1980s on. It is unclear whether most members of society interested in this question were most eager to know the secrets of the geopolitical ‘witch’s brew’ that shaped domestic events, or the mechanisms behind constitutional transformation – though such curiosity was not unheard of. But the irregularities that came to light in the early, pre-1990 phase of economic restructuring and privatization did arouse widespread concern. People sought to understand both the causes and the culprits. This need only grew stronger from the mid-1990s, by which time a significant portion of the employed population had experienced unemployment for some length of time. The sense of existential uncertainty – and the irritation born of seeking

someone to blame – directed attention back to these very recent developments. Nor should it go unmentioned that privatization and economic transformation stood – and, indeed, often still stand – at the top of the ‘popular issues’ list in public discussions about the regime change, because a decisive proportion of Hungarian society expected above all improved material conditions and a Western standard of living to emerge from the disappearance of the totalitarian regime, the advent of democracy, and the establishment of a capitalist economy.

The discipline of history – and indeed scholarship as a whole – understandably lagged behind these ‘interpretive efforts’, for it lacked accessible and reliable sources. And even had such sources been available, there would have been no time to process them, to compare them where necessary, to sift the information critically, and then to offer an interpretation as objective as circumstances allowed. There was neither opportunity nor social patience for such work: those who wanted answers wanted them immediately; they sought clear-cut causes and identifiable culprits, and had little interest in scholarly restraint. It is hardly surprising that the historical profession sought for many years to keep its distance from a question that was so highly politicized, and that generated any number of conspiracy theories. Only in the second half of the 1990s did the first

scholarly, though not lengthy and very cautiously formulated – one might almost say tentative – statements about privatization begin to appear.<sup>3</sup>

A similar phenomenon can be observed in connection with the so-called ‘agent question’, which has repeatedly captured public attention. Almost from the moment the Parliament elected in 1990 began its work, speculation, accusations, and insinuations surfaced about which members of Parliament – or indeed which figures in political life more broadly – had ‘been agents’, i.e., had formerly worked for the communist regime’s secret services, reporting on their acquaintances and friends. This issue, not always contemporaneous with the regime change itself, yet closely connected to it in other respects, was also weaponized in the arena of political struggle to discredit certain individuals by claiming that they had allegedly collaborated with the secret services under the dictatorship. It is not the aim of this essay to explore the full complexity and difficulties of the so-called agent question (the fragmentary nature of the secret-service files, the problem of who can genuinely be considered an agent, and so on). It is mentioned here merely as another example in which the historian’s more slowly emerging, cautiously phrased, complex position – one that also attends to differences between individual cases – was far less audible to the public than other, simplified claims presented journalistically yet advertised

<sup>3</sup> One of the very first works to appear with scholarly ambitions – though necessarily providing only a general overview, and able to rely on only limited data – on the so-called ‘spontaneous privatisation’, which had begun even before the free elections, is: Kollega Tarsoly, István (ed.): *Magyarország a XX. században*. II. Természeti környezet, népesség és társadalom, egyházak és felekezetek, gazdaság. Szekszárd, 1997. 675-683.

as if they were professional, investigative accounts of the past.<sup>4</sup>

But this slowness and caution were not signs of indifference or inactivity. From roughly the second half of the 1990s onward, more and more historical sources that had previously been inaccessible became available to researchers, primarily in the Hungarian National Archives and in the Historical Archives of the State Security Services, though also in other public collections. This, too, contributed to the increasing number of works with scholarly aims or scholarly character that appeared on the subject of the regime change from the turn of the millennium on. These writings and volumes tended to focus more on the political processes of the transition in Hungary, treating other origins of the political transformation in less detail. Economic, social, and cultural aspects were largely relegated to the background. One of the signal merits of these early publications is that, being among the first of their kind, they provided points of reference for later authors, whether in agreement or disagreement with their periodization of the transition, their selection of focal points, and the interpretations that followed from these.<sup>5</sup>

From the early 2010s onwards, an ever greater number of scholarly works on the regime

change began to be published. A significant role in this development was played by our own institute, founded in 2013 under the name Research Institute and Archives for the History of Regime Change (RETÖRKI). To date, nearly eighty volumes have been published by institute staff members and commissioned authors. Among these are numerous edited collections of studies, either examining the regime change as a whole or focusing on its key moments and its historical or intellectual antecedents; oral history publications featuring interviews with figures active in public and political life between 1985 and 1990; volumes publishing primary sources; monographs; conference proceedings; and other genres.<sup>6</sup> The source publications have drawn heavily on the institute's archival collection, which since 2022 has operated as a public private archive. Alongside the private papers of many individuals who played significant roles in public life during the regime change and its preparatory period, the collection also preserves the records of several political parties and social organizations.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, RETÖRKI staff have also prepared editions of material from other archival holdings.

There is great diversity not only in the genres but also in the topics covered by RETÖRKI publications. Surveying them, one can, with some

simplification, distinguish three main thematic areas that have received particular attention in the institute's scholarly work. (Naturally, each of these can be broken down into numerous subtopics, and most of the individual works focus on one or another segment within these broader themes.) The first is, naturally, the regime change itself. Within this field, special emphasis has been placed on examining the activity of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. This includes publishing its documentary sources, producing a monograph analyzing the strategic and tactical disagreements within the MSZMP leadership, assembling a source volume highlighting the key stages of the process of transition, and compiling and publishing oral history collections. The second thematic area concerns the broader antecedents of the regime change, above all the domestic intellectual contexts, the groups and organizations that carried oppositional or reformist ideas to varying degrees, and the anti-communist émigré communities. Last, though by no means least, the third thematic field given particular emphasis is the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, as well as the ensuing reprisals. The reason 1956 has received such prominent attention – and the reason I did not list it merely among the 'straightforward' antecedents of the regime change – lies in its significance

<sup>4</sup> Naturally, none of this detracts in any way from the scholarly value of the work and efforts of historians such as (to name only a few) Nóra Székér, Gábor Tabajdi, or Krisztián Ungváry.

<sup>5</sup> Among these works, this volume – written with the aim of providing an overview – must in any case be singled out, as it remains the only attempt to date to offer a synthesis of the history of the regime change. Ripp, Zoltán: *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon 1987–1990*. Budapest, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete list of RETÖRKI's own publications, see: <https://retorki.hu/kiadvanyok> (Accessed: 18 November 2025.)

<sup>7</sup> For the list of holdings of the RETÖRKI Archives, see: <https://leveltar.retorki.hu/rendszervaltas-tortenetet-kutato-intezet-es-leveltar> (Accessed 18 November 2025.) (In Hungarian).

for the development of twentieth-century Hungarian history as a whole. It fundamentally shaped the thinking both of the power that crushed it with Soviet bayonets and of those who opposed that power. As a point of reference and orientation, it remained central throughout the period of the regime change as well: all the oppositional parties formed in 1988–89 in opposition to the communist regime regarded 1956 as a vital legacy. For this reason, we at RETÖRKI have always considered 1956 a research topic of distinct importance.

One scholarly consequence – as well as a clear benefit – of the institute’s research activity has been to make clear just how complex the problems are that complicate our understanding of the journey leading up to the end of the dictatorship and the free elections of 1990. (Let us set aside, for the moment, the question of whether the available sources are narrow or broad in scope, and simply take their condition as given.) Perhaps the most far-reaching of these research problems is what we may call a ‘multiple antecedent context’. The Hungarian regime change is bound, by a thousand strands of varying thickness, to the post-1956 period – let us call it the Kádár era – and many of the moments and dynamics of the transition can only be properly interpreted with an understanding of this background context. But the era marked by the leadership of János Kádár was itself, in one

way or another, the descendant of the Stalinist dictatorship under Mátyás Rákosi. That too, therefore, must be regarded, if only indirectly, as part of the regime change’s antecedent system. (We have already spoken of the special role of 1956.) The Rákosi regime, for its part, defined itself as the antithesis of the pre-1945 Hungarian political and social order – and also, to some extent, of the democratic experiment of the second half of 1940s. Yet that earlier order was recognized by some as having real value, and the 1945–49 period in particular was explicitly identified by some of the actors during the regime change as a ‘return point’. Moreover, in the interwar period several Hungarian intellectual currents and socio-political movements emerged whose influence – sometimes openly, at other times like an underground stream – could be felt more or less strongly up to the mid-1980s, and has thereafter in many respects continued to shape our understanding of Hungarian identity, the relationship between state and national community, social justice, social mobility, and so on. Time and again we have encountered situations in which a particular moment of the regime change has far more demonstrable antecedents – often stretching quite far back in time – than previously assumed, and where understanding these antecedents requires a deeper knowledge of the period in question. Moreover, questions frequently arise in periods more distant from the regime change

that have so far received little sustained scholarly attention, and thus necessitate primary research.

We must also face the fact that the historical profession has so far dealt predominantly with the political history of the regime change. This is understandable and in many respects justifiable; nevertheless, we increasingly feel the need to place greater emphasis on social, mental, and cultural-historical research, both with regard to the regime change itself and the multiple layers of antecedent context mentioned above. The same holds true for economic history, which – as noted earlier – occasionally attracts broader public interest as well, owing to the irregularities associated with privatization and the system of state compensation<sup>8</sup> that began in the early 1990s. Undeniably, in these research areas many open fields remain to be explored. A purely political-historical approach carries the risk of one-sidedness, and for this reason too it would be desirable to undertake more research that goes beyond analyzing political events and actors alone.

These two research problems, however, are not merely obstacles; they can also help to identify avenues of investigation into the regime change that have so far been little pursued, or indeed not pursued at all. By taking account of the multiple antecedent contexts and by applying approaches that extend beyond political history, profitable insights may emerge

<sup>8</sup> The state compensation provided after 1990 – in the form of compensation vouchers – to those harmed by the waves of expropriation carried out after 1945, which affected industrial, agricultural, and other private property and were implemented by force, did not in fact achieve its intended purpose,

from historical research into the vertical segments of twentieth-century Hungarian society. Such work could tell us far more than we presently know about the mental, ideological, and existential condition in which various social groups existed in the late 1980s. Closely aligned with this aim – and promising a wealth of new knowledge about the relationship between oppositional, regime-critical intellectual circles and communist power – is the cultural, scholarly, and thus intellectual-historical research already underway within RETÖRKI. This, in turn, highlights the potential benefits of applying the methodology of intellectual history, which could greatly enrich our understanding by uncovering the ideological-theoretical background and historical underpinnings of the politics and worldviews to which those engaged in the regime change felt committed. In this respect, too, the anti-communist Hungarian émigré community represents an important area of study, for in many cases it played a decisive role in preserving and carrying

forward these ideological values until more favourable times. Finally, to understand personal motivations from new perspectives, the application of the approaches and methods of psycho-biographical research may also prove fruitful.

It can be stated with confidence that the source bases potentially needed to begin the above lines of inquiry are available. Anyone embarking on such research will likely have to reckon with two things: first, they will need to step away in time (and at times also in space) from the period of the Hungarian regime change, acquiring familiarity with other eras to the extent required by their chosen topic; and second, they will need to collaborate more extensively with fellow specialists than has been customary, so that the often unusually complex approaches and frameworks of analysis can be sustained. After all, no one can be expert in everything.

In my view, it is worth giving serious thought to the research possibilities and directions

outlined above, and to developing and refining them in greater detail. In doing so, the regime change can be more organically connected with other periods, and those elements, currents, and phenomena of twentieth-century Hungarian history that are often examined in isolation – divided by the political regimes that punctuated the century – can, where relevant, be shown in their continuity. Moreover, it is not impossible that by opening the ‘time-gate’ still further into the past, the light of understanding might fall more strongly in the opposite direction as well, illuminating the post-transition period. We may even gain deeper insight into the public life, mentality, and current national dilemmas of our own time. In any case, it promises to be a fascinating endeavour, even if we must continue along that same narrow mountain ledge already mentioned – proceeding, in comparison with others, at no great speed.

Dániel Havasi

## Interview with Gábor Nyári



**You have been at the head of RETÖRKI for more than five years. What vision did you outline for the Institute when you submitted your application for the position of director general in 2020?**

Before submitting my application in 2020, I already had a historian's sense of the aims with which RETÖRKI had been established, and of the earlier focus the Institute had pursued. At that time, its work centred above all on the active participants of the democratic transition and, within that circle, particularly on the Hungarian Democratic Forum – which was not only a decisive party in regime change, but also the largest governing party of the period immediately following.

What I defined as a primary goal was not a rejection of that initial work, but rather an extension of it: building on the existing foundations while broadening the scope of research topics. I believe that the regime change is very difficult to understand in isolation. The turning point of 1989–90 can only truly be grasped if we have a firm understanding of Hungary's entire twentieth-century history.

In addition to expanding the framework of research, I wanted to give greater emphasis to educational and public-outreach activities. Another aim was to widen and deepen our international partnerships, and I also hoped to bring some change to RETÖRKI's publication policy. The Institute had previously produced many valuable – and indeed indispensable – volumes, but they were primarily linked to those circles that shaped its early years. I wanted to broaden this, both in terms of genre and subject matter, which is why we launched several new book series. By addressing the issue of distribution, I also hoped to reach a much broader audience.

**You mentioned that you aim to interpret twentieth-century Hungarian history in its full breadth. Approaching the question from a different historical perspective: as a researcher of the Horthy era, what insights or experience from that period can you bring to the study of the regime change?**

As I said earlier, in my view the process of regime change cannot be understood without taking the entire twentieth century into account. It begins with the devastating defeat in the First World War, followed by Trianon – one of the greatest tragedies in Hungarian national history. After that comes the recovery: independence regained after five centuries and an attempt to recuperate from the trauma. But then a second world war follows, bringing yet more catastrophes, including of course the Holocaust. Next comes the establishment of a communist dictatorship, against which the Revolution and War of Independence broke out on 23 October 1956. After its suppression, the dictatorship continued, until eventually we reached the regime change: on 2 May 1990 the first freely and democratically elected Parliament convened, with representatives of the formerly annexed territories present, and with the representatives of the persecuted historical churches sitting in the chamber. And 23 October – the date on which the 1956 revolution began – was enshrined in law as a national holiday. To grasp how significant all this is for Hungarians, one must understand the great arcs and ruptures of twentieth-century Hungarian history. This is why I consider it essential to broaden our research and, widening our horizon, to examine the entire century.

I would also note that although we usually associate the term 'regime change' specifically with the events of 1989–90, if we look at

Hungary's twentieth-century history we find that many regime changes – or processes that can be understood as such – took place over those decades.

To return to your question: the Horthy era itself accounts for more than two decades of an already 'short' twentieth-century timeline. And it is an immensely formative period. Those who came of age under Horthy – who were educated or embarked on public or political careers during that time – went on to shape much of the century as a whole. A number of them re-emerged during the regime change, either returning from emigration or stepping out of internal marginalization. The interpretation of the Horthy period became a focal point of major public disputes during the transition. Under communism it had been branded as a fascist, anti-Semitic era, and these accusations continued to surface even during the years of regime change. In truth, the matter has still not been fully settled today.

But the deeper reason why I believe the study of the Horthy era – and indeed of the Rákosi and Kádár periods – is indispensable for understanding the regime change is that each had its own political system, its own elite, its own society, its own forms of legitimacy, and its own memory-political narratives that shaped identity. Only by understanding these can we form a coherent picture of twentieth-century Hungarian history – and only in that light can we answer the question of who we Hungarians are today, in 2025.

**Today the research staff of RETÖRKI has undergone a complete generational change. In this process, what new perspectives did you aim to introduce, and is there still a desire to preserve the intellectual continuity of the founding circle?**

We have not broken entirely with the founding circle. We continue to perform the public tasks laid down in law, and our founding body, the Lakitelek-based Népfőiskola Foundation, remains one of the cradles of the regime change. Lakitelek was, in 1987, one of the most important meeting points of the opposition. It can be seen as one of the decisive starting points of the entire transition process, a place in which every strand of the opposition that stood up against the then-existing power structure found some point of connection.

The link between the 1987 Lakitelek meeting and the Népfőiskola Foundation is the figure of the founder, Sándor Lezsák, deputy speaker of the Hungarian Parliament, in whose garden the famous tent was raised – the tent in which the thinkers, public intellectuals, and cultural figures who recognized the need for change gathered, many of whom later played an active role in the political transition itself.

At the same time, the Institute's current staff of experts and researchers is extremely young. The average age is thirty-six, which means that most did not even live through the regime change. I consider this a fortunate circumstance: this young team can approach the events with a healthy sense of distance. Fortunately, many people who experienced the transition first-hand are still with us; we can speak with them, and several of them were formerly active in the Institute. But in order to transform personal memory into a form of collective memory, a certain detachment – in the positive sense – is necessary.

Furthermore, the broadened scope of research required a different type of professional staff. It is not only a matter of historians: our archival colleagues and educational specialists play an equally important role. The Institute also has a strong talent-nurturing mission: we continually seek to involve university students and doctoral candidates working on the period, whether through conferences or specific research projects. In addition, we aim to cultivate a workshop-like atmosphere throughout the Institute. We are not a large organization – twenty-six people altogether, including operational staff. This small number naturally limits the scale of what we can do, but it also creates an opportunity to function as a closely-knit research workshop, capable of highly focused, collaborative work.

**Not everyone instinctively realizes that this is not a political analysis unit, but a historical research institute. What mission follows from that fact?**

We are a classical research institute – although we do not always, and not necessarily, rely on entirely classical research methods. Wherever possible, we move in the direction of innovation. But our mission and our possibilities are above all defined – as I have already mentioned – by the fact that we continue to perform public tasks laid

down in law. These are: to research the process of the regime change; to collect the relevant sources; and, closely linked to both, to reach the broadest possible proportion of society. There is no other institution in Hungary tasked with a comparable mandate. Our organizational structure – a non-profit public-benefit company operating in the NGO sphere – also enables us to carry out these statutory responsibilities in as innovative a manner as possible. This is what allows us to open up, to reach out more effectively to our target audiences both within Hungary and internationally.

**When speaking about RETÖRKI we usually mention the Institute itself, but we should not forget the documentation centre. As a research workshop, how significant do you consider the Lakitelek Archive?**

Our collection originally began its life as an archive, and in 2022 it was formally elevated to the rank of a public archive. It is therefore one of the youngest archives in Hungary, and at present we hold roughly 280 linear metres of records. In addition, we have a substantial photographic, video, and cassette collection, so our audiovisual holdings are also considerable. What I would particularly highlight is that we collect private papers – but in our definition this does not only include the papers of individuals; in many cases it also covers organizations and political parties. As a result, our collecting scope is broad, and our holdings are correspondingly diverse – this gives us a major advantage, since a significant share of our research can be grounded in our own archival material. It is something of a rarity internationally for an institution to function simultaneously as an archive and a research institute, while also serving the needs of external researchers. The development and expansion of our collection is largely thanks to our director for archival development, András Riba, whose work in this field was recognized last year with a high state honour.

We have several research projects and publications that draw directly on our own archival holdings, and I would also stress our ‘research–archive’ programme. The essence of this is that colleagues working in the archive and in the research department – almost all of whom are trained historians – collaborate on their individual research projects as well as joint

ones. In other words, there is no strict dividing line between archival and scholarly work, which creates excellent opportunities for cooperation.

Thanks to the flexibility our institutional structure allows, our archive is also able to develop an innovative presence in the field of preservation – an area which, unfortunately, receives insufficient attention not only in Hungary but, in my view, across much of Europe. We have held several preservation workshops, and we seek to introduce into Hungary techniques that are still relatively uncommon both here and elsewhere on the continent, adapting and further developing them for local conditions.

Our archive building – purpose-built as an archive, which is itself something of a rarity – is located in Lakitelek, where a portion of the processing work is carried out.

**You have emphasized several times that innovation is one of the pillars of RETÖRKI's work. Could you share a few more examples of what this looks like in practice?**

As already noted, our publications are one important area: we currently have four book series, amounting in total to around eighty volumes. Our *RETÖRKI Könyvek* series includes monographs and edited collections – in other words, the more traditional scholarly works. Alongside this we run the *Források* (Sources) series, a set of source editions containing thematically curated primary material, prepared in the classic academic fashion for use by researchers. One notable volume in this series was produced together with our young research staff: a selection of documents from the MSZMP Political Committee from the second half of the 1980s, presented not comprehensively but selectively, and designed specifically as a university reader, complete with annotations, reference material, and an explanatory apparatus to support students as effectively as possible.

Our *Elbeszélt történelem* (Oral History) series gives voice to figures of twentieth-century Hungarian history who, at particular moments, played a significant role either for a given community or for the country as a whole. Through their perspective we aim to illuminate the historical processes they lived through.

I would also mention our *Műhelytanulmányok* (Working Papers) series, which was created explicitly with talent development in mind. Its purpose is to provide a publication platform for early-career researchers who have reached a stage in their work where they already have substantive results, but not yet in the fully polished, definitive form of a monograph. These are rigorous scholarly studies, but still in progress. This is a multi-layered process. For example, we have collaborated with the Cultural History Doctoral School at ELTE, the outcome of which was a set of seminar papers that we published in the *Műhelytanulmányok* series, dealing with portrayals of Hungarian identity in the school textbooks of neighbouring states.

In the same spirit of talent development we also organize doctoral conferences. Based on submitted abstracts, we select doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences whose research focuses on the twentieth century. They present their findings, then develop their papers into written studies, which we likewise publish in the *Műhelytanulmányok* series and distribute to the appropriate academic circles.

Our periodical, the *Rendszerváltó Szemle* (Regime Change Review), appears quarterly in thematic issues and has now reached its tenth issue. Over this decade it has become an indispensable journal for twentieth-century historical research. RETÖRKI is the only Hungarian research institute that can boast a scholarly journal with such a sustained history.

We make our publications available not only in print but also through major academic online databases.

Beyond all this, I should certainly highlight the innovations associated with our Educational and Didactic Workshop – the educational branch of the Institute. *Retörki Kronológia* (RETÖRKI Chronology) is an online database presenting the processes of twentieth-century history through short studies and accompanying audiovisual materials. It is designed to support teachers as well as pupils and university students in preparing lessons and study materials. It aligns with the requirements of the National Core Curriculum and is freely accessible to all.



Gábor Nyári, chief executive officer of RETÖRKI

We have also organized numerous archival pedagogy sessions and continue to run workshops, both independently and in cooperation with other institutions. But the highlight of this year – and something that I believe has genuine international potential – is our app *HistóriApp*, which is completely free and accessible to everyone. We spent several years developing it, and it is currently the only Hungarian-language application that focuses specifically on twentieth-century history, from the collapse at the end of the First World War all the way to the regime change. The app has two parts: a quiz game and a knowledge base. The quiz, structured in line with the National Core Curriculum, is divided into seven historical periods, seventeen thematic units and thirty-four topics, containing more than a thousand questions across seven different game types and a final ‘chapter test’. The more correct answers the user gives, the more sets of questions unlock. We were careful to design the games so that they are genuinely engaging – addictive, even – while still providing substantial factual knowledge.

The knowledge-base section contains more than five hundred entries, covering the same periods, units, and topics in detail. This means that whenever a user gets stuck on a question, or simply wishes to explore a theme more deeply,

they can dive into the relevant entry and read more about it. *HistóriApp*'s primary target group is secondary-school students, especially those preparing for their final examinations. For this reason, we added an extra function that allows teachers to create groups within the app. This makes it possible not only for students to compete individually, but also for whole classes to compare their newly acquired knowledge during lessons under a teacher's guidance.

The reception has been overwhelmingly positive. We released the app shortly before the final exams, and within barely a month it was downloaded more than fifteen thousand times. During this period *HistóriApp* topped the thematic rankings of both the App Store and Google Play in Hungary. Many students wrote to tell us that they used the app as their main revision tool for the exam – and we very much intend to continue this work. Our plan is to deepen the app by adding multiple difficulty levels and to expand it both chronologically and geographically: incorporating earlier periods and including world history. In the longer term, we aim to make *HistóriApp* available in English as well.

**Stepping out onto the international stage, RETÖRKI's foreign partnerships have steadily expanded over the past few years. But this year the process seems to have accelerated. Was this the result of a deliberate strategy?**

Yes – it is very much the result of a deliberate strategy. Our aim in stepping out onto the international stage has been to present our research as widely as possible and to show how we approach history. This 'internationalization' has several arenas. In 2023, for example, at our conference *Helmut Kohl and Central Europe* held in the Hungarian Parliament, our explicit intention was to view the region's history through Kohl's career and to offer a genuinely international perspective: Hungarian, certainly, but with Czech and German viewpoints likewise represented. Last year we chose to focus on the tragic events of 1944, again primarily from a Hungarian standpoint but with an international outlook as well. We are confident that in the coming years we will be able to organize more international conferences – not only in history as such, but also in the fields of preservation science and history didactics.

Several of our colleagues have delivered papers abroad. From this year I would single out two talks given by our Director of Research, Péter Strausz – one in Indonesia and one in Kazakhstan – but we also have a number of ongoing international projects. At present, two of our researchers are working in the United States, at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

Many of our staff publish in foreign-language journals, and the results of our history-didactics workshop have also been presented several times within V4 cooperation projects. And now our journal, *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, is itself entering the international arena.

Happily, the process is reciprocal. We are seeing increasing interest in our institute from abroad. Not long ago we hosted a South Korean governmental delegation, and only recently I myself led an archival-pedagogy session in Lakitelek for a visiting group of French students. At our latest doctoral conference, a young Russian researcher delivered a paper.

We hope that through our journal and our wider activities we will be able to reach an ever larger number of international partners. On the one hand, this has clear regional significance: the states of Central Europe underwent similar transitions from dictatorship to democracy, and there is a real need for a more active exchange of experience and scholarly dialogue. Twentieth-century history has left deep marks on this region, and since Trianon our international relations have not always been entirely smooth. Today, however, we maintain good relations with virtually all our neighbours – not only on the academic scene, but in public life generally – and this is reflected in cooperation between our research institutions. On the other hand, we want to make our own past, and our interpretation of our historical experience, more widely known to Western Europe and, ideally, even beyond Europe. We want to deepen the scholarly dialogue – and of course we are just as curious about how others see us.

**Looking beyond our region, we are now witnessing – or perhaps enduring – what some call a global 'system change'. Do you see any opportunity for the Institute to draw advantages, in terms of international**

## networking, from the current turbulence in world affairs?

I would divide the question into two parts. Since at least Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's 2024 speech in Tusványos, the notion of a global 'system change' has become part of Hungarian public discourse: the idea that the processes now unfolding around the world might amount to a fundamental transformation of the international order. And here the historian in me inevitably speaks up.

Every political order rests on certain foundations: its political structures, its society, its legal and institutional framework, its economic arrangements, and the memory politics, culture, and identity which hold it together. These are the essential building blocks of any system. In my view, if several of these foundations – or indeed all of them – undergo significant change, then we may speak of a true system change. This can happen within a single country, within a region, or even, in principle, on a global scale.

If we look at the twentieth century from this perspective, the First World War did in fact bring about such a transformation internationally. Almost all the fundamental elements I have just mentioned were altered: patterns of ownership shifted; mass participation in political life became both more possible and more desired; legal frameworks were rewritten; and a far-reaching process of political and social experimentation began – a process that, in some respects, continues to this day.

Responses therefore had to be found to these crises, and among them were answers that essentially said: let us continue along the path we have already taken. Here we might mention Great Britain or France, and in my view even Hungary under the Horthy era also falls into this category after the First World War. There were responses we can, in retrospect, regard as positive – the emergence of mass democracies, for example. Then there were others we judge negatively today, which led to the various totalitarian dictatorships; and there were systems that combined elements of both, which are very difficult to classify – Salazar's Portugal comes to mind. All these were political, social, and economic orders shaped by different ideologies, which is why the twentieth century can, globally, be described as the age of ideologies.

But every system has a natural lifespan. It may be that we have reached a point where these competing ideologies no longer drive the world forward but in many cases have become obstacles to change. Without making value judgements here, we can see that the debates within Western civilization today are fundamentally different from those of seventy or eighty – or even thirty – years ago. This naturally raises the question for me as well: could what we are witnessing – the deepening divides within societies and between political fault lines – lead to a global system change that ushers in an age of pragmatism? That would imply that individual communities, states, or groups of states, while preserving their own identities and following their own ideological paths, might become far more flexible in their external partnerships, guided by their own interests and values. This does *not* mean that everything would become universally acceptable everywhere – that would only create chaos. But if we judged partners less exclusively through the lens of our own ideology, and were willing to accept their perspectives as well, a new global era could indeed emerge.

Such a process would naturally bring both advantages and disadvantages, but it undoubtedly offers opportunities even for an institute like ours – one that keeps the Hungarian regime change at the centre of its work – to build far broader international networks.

Why did I say this is a two-component issue? Because alongside these geopolitical shifts we are also living through a technological revolution. The previous stage was the arrival of the internet; now, with the rise of artificial intelligence, we are undergoing yet another transformation. In many fields – especially in the humanities – AI is often treated as something dangerous or unwelcome, but history itself teaches us that smashing the looms did not halt the industrial revolution. Used wisely, these technological innovations can help us to understand and disseminate each other's research far more effectively at an international level – both among individual scholars and among research institutes.

**Is there an intention on the part of RETÖRKI to seek out partners proactively in countries that are currently undergoing political, social, or economic transitions – and where the lessons**

## of the Hungarian regime change might be of use? Can such lessons even be 'exported'?

Not wholesale, of course – but to a certain extent, yes. If we look only at the states of our own region and the ways in which regime change unfolded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is no coincidence that the term *rendszer váltás* (regime change) is used primarily here in Hungary, and even here in several different senses. The local particularities are enormous; individual political and social systems all have their own distinctive profiles. For this reason alone, our experience simply cannot be transplanted elsewhere one-to-one. What *can* and *should* be done, however, is experience sharing – and this can have significant international value. Even if we do not speak of 'complete regime change', we can observe in many places today the sudden rise of political forces that appear, at first glance, to emerge from nowhere. Resistance to established political elites is growing globally, and not only in the Western world. Naturally, these actors never truly appear from thin air: the social bases behind them are almost always present in their societies for many years or decades. This was the case in Hungary as well. If we remain with the Hungarian regime change as an example: the opposition of the late 1980s had, in some respects, roots going back to the 1930s in the form of the '*népi*' and '*urbánus*' writers. The legacy of 1956, and the individuals involved in the revolution, survived – even if only in closed form – throughout the Kádár era. And when the opposition parties stepped forward in 1990, they did not do so out of nowhere: there were pre-existing smaller and larger communities that recognized one another and cohered.

So, to sum up: we are entirely open to sharing both our experience and our methods. We were honoured this year by the interest shown from South Korea: a large delegation from the Ministry of Unification visited our institute to learn what conclusions might be drawn from the Hungarian regime change – politically, socially, economically, institutionally, and legally. They were also curious about what difficulties we faced, and what lessons can be distilled from those challenges.

**In the late 2010s, RETÖRKI managed to build fairly intensive cooperation with both Ukrainian and Russian research institutes and archives, and several joint projects were completed. How do you assess the future of this now largely dormant network of relationships under the present circumstances? And personally, how confident are you that the war will be resolved within a foreseeable timeframe?**

Given the current situation, it seems clear to me that V4 partnerships, as well as other European and even non-European international relationships, are the ones that can realistically be brought to the fore. At the same time, we must not forget the remarkable work being done behind the scenes by the Hungarian archival delegate in Moscow to ensure that these ties do not freeze completely – so that, when the moment comes, they can actually be picked up again. I very much hope that the war will come to an end soon; after all, it is in everyone's interest that it should. But this question, too, touches on the wider issue of whether – and how – we are transitioning from an age of ideologies towards what one might call a system of pragmatism.

We do not necessarily know what the real objectives of the opposing sides are, nor whether these have even been clearly defined – and at present, we are also turning this war into yet another contest of 'truths'. However strongly one may feel that one side or the other is in the right, war – like history itself – has never been a morality play. As long as we continue to interpret it as such, it will be very difficult to bring the armed conflict to a close, even though doing so would be in everyone's interest. And if it does eventually end, I believe that a profound mistrust will remain on both the Ukrainian and the Russian side. Let us put it this way: I hope there will still be something to reach back to – that we will be able to identify those shared points of contact and those common interests on the basis of which relations can once again be renewed.

Vivien Rapali

# International Models and Domestic Characteristics: the History of the University of Technology<sup>1</sup> and Technical Higher Education Between the Two World Wars



This study examines the development of technical higher education in Hungary between the two world wars in an international context. It pays special attention to the history of the University of Technology, its institutional restructuring, its challenges in infrastructure and educational organization, and also the impact of foreign models – especially German and American. The study also gives an insight into how the university strove to maintain its scientific and cultural position in the changing political and economic environment following the First World War.

The roots of the history of technical higher education in Hungary go back to the eighteenth century. The *Institutum Geometricum*, established in 1782, which operated as an engineering institute and organisationally belonged to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Buda, was the second civil engineer training institute in Europe, where students could study technical sciences

within a university framework.<sup>2</sup> Despite its importance, however, the *Institutum* was not able to rectify the growing shortage of experts, which was the result of the industrial boom at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and for this reason the need to establish an independent Hungarian university of technology soon arose.<sup>3</sup> There was a similar demand for independent technical universities in the region as well: technical colleges were founded in Prague (1806), Vienna (1815), Berlin (1820), and Karlsruhe (1825).<sup>4</sup>

The *Institutum* was closed by an imperial decree in 1850, and was attached to the *József Ipartanoda* (Joseph Industrial School), which had been established in 1846. The *Joseph Industrieschule*, formed from the merger of these two institutions, started operating in 1850. As a result of the closing of the *Institutum* and the merger of its remnants, the examinations required for qualification as an engineer were not conducted, and engineering degrees were

not issued, thus this measure eliminated university-level engineering training in Hungary for many years.<sup>5</sup> It followed directly from this that from the 1850s until the establishment of the Royal Joseph University of Technology, which operated within the organizational framework of a true university, for nearly thirty years young people in Hungary were forced to enrol in foreign technical universities.<sup>6</sup> The need to attend German and Swiss universities in the course of these two decades was reflected in the qualifications of the later Royal Joseph University of Technology's academic staff, in the organizational structure of the institution, its curriculum, and its foreign scientific relations.

The Compromise in 1867 brought about a significant change in attitudes towards an independent Hungarian university of technology.<sup>7</sup> The Royal Joseph University of Technology, which from the academic year of 1871/1872 was elevated to university status, not only in its

<sup>1</sup> Currently: Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

<sup>2</sup> By elevating technical education to the level of higher education, even France was surpassed, where the *École Polytechnique* was founded 12 years later, in 1794, to compensate for the shortage of engineers and civil servants. Zelovich, Kornél: *A m. kir. József Műegyetem és a hazai technikai felsőoktatás története*. Budapest, Pátria Irodalmi Vállalat és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság, 1922, 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Millenniumi évkönyv*. Ed. Kiss, Márton. Budapest, Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem, 2000., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Kiss *op. cit.* 2000, 11. The newly established institution was classified as a university of technology only in 1857, even then only in its name, as the organizational structure indispensable for university operation (elected rector, organizational regulations) was not granted, it was then named Joseph Polytechnics.

<sup>6</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 128.

name but also in terms of its organizational framework, was the first technical higher educational institution in the world to have the word 'university' in its name.<sup>8</sup>

The next important turning point in the history of the university was the organizational restructuring of the institution in 1934. Established under Act X of 1934, the Palatine Joseph University of Technology and Economics, with its new organizational structure and 98 departments, became the largest institution of higher education in the country, and continued to operate essentially unchanged until the end of the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

#### PROBLEMS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNICAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN HUNGARY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

During the period under discussion, one of the most important and recurrent questions concerning the university's development was the modernization of the operating conditions. Although the issue of the development of engineering education and institutional infrastructure had already emerged at the turn of the century, finding a solution to these problems became even more urgent after the First World War. Added to this was the need to increase the number of teachers, especially assistant teachers.

The infrastructure developments were also justified by the outdated equipment at the University of Technology. The university's technical equipment, both in terms of the laboratories and the specialized library collection, was outdated and incomplete. The latter was particularly true of foreign-language specialist literature: there was a significant shortage of specialist books and professional journals.<sup>10</sup> The university council requested 2,200,000 kronen<sup>11</sup> (korona) for modern equipment as early as 1907, which the government at the time planned to allocate over a period of ten years. Of course, the ten-year development programme would have done little to alleviate the problems. First, because a decade is too long a period in the field of technical sciences, and secondly, because the university did not receive the entire amount allocated. After the war, the value of money decreased so rapidly and to such an extent that the allocated funds covered only a small part of the costs.<sup>12</sup>

As far as the education system is concerned, the opinions among contemporaries were also divided. The reform of technical education was on the agenda throughout the interwar period, and was discussed, among other venues, in a presentation by Sándor Rohringer at the National Higher Education Congress in 1936, and again in 1942 at the Hungarian Association of Engineers and

Architects.<sup>13</sup> The debate centred on whether education should be based more on strong theoretical foundations or practical training. Some argued that the excessive theoretical training of students and their lack of practical experience made it difficult to harmonize education with industrial needs – and for young engineers to find jobs.

However, others thought that strong theoretical training would develop proficiency in scientific research, related skills, and the training of universal engineers who could do well in many fields. This general tendency was expressed by several professors at the University of Technology. Zoltán Magyary, the noted professor of public administration and politician – with some others – shared the same view: '[...] the basic problem for all faculties is the proper balance between professional training and scientific research and the resulting training of scientists. [...] The vast majority of their students are striving to obtain this degree at the university, without having any particular scientific inclination. It is understandable and legitimate for the state to expect universities to provide students with a thorough education that will prepare them for public life. [...] This vocational training contrasts with the other, more traditional vocation of universities: the advancement of science and the training of scientists.'<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The first Doctor of Engineering was Szilárd Zielinski, who was awarded the degree in 1902. Kiss *op. cit.* 2000, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Kiss *op. cit.* 2000, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 304–307.

<sup>11</sup> Krone/kronen, in Hungarian: korona. The official currency in Hungary during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

<sup>12</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 304–305.

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see: Rohringer, Sándor: Hozzászólás [az 1936. évi Országos Felsőoktatási Kongresszus általános szakosztályának tárgyalásain]. In: *A magyar felsőoktatás. Az 1936. évi december hó 10-től december hó 16-ig tartott Országos Felsőoktatási Kongresszus munkálatai. I.* Ed. Martonffy, Károly. Budapest, Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1937, 82–84.; Beszámoló a Magyar Mérnök- és Építész Egylet Gépészeti és Közgazdasági Szakosztály mérnökönevelési vitájáról. *Magyar Mérnök- és Építész Egylet Értekezések*, No. 8. 1942, 1–104.

<sup>14</sup> *A magyar tudománypolitika alapvetése.* Ed. Magyary, Zoltán. Budapest, Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1927., 214.



Laboratory staff at the University of Technology (1937).  
Source: BME Topotéka. <https://muegyetem.topoteka.net/?doc=421249>

After the war, the dramatically increasing number of students – young people returning from military service, or fleeing from the annexed territories, etc. – made it necessary to increase the number of professors. However, this was hindered by Article XXXV of 1923,<sup>15</sup> which limited the number of public employees, making it impossible to increase the number of professors at the University of Technology. In addition, the law not only prohibited the recruitment of new teachers, but it also eliminated 42 budget-financed positions.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, all of the above-mentioned problems can be traced back to a common cause: the lack of adequate financial resources. At the turn of the century, the allocation of funds necessary

for university development was hindered by the complicated legal and financial system of the Dual Monarchy. During and after the First World War, inflation put a stop to the investments needed for modernization. But even after the disbursement of the League of Nations loans, it was not possible to develop a financing system that would have solved all of the university's problems within a given time frame. However, the practical training required by the curriculum, the introduction of reforms concerning modern engineering training to meet industrial and market needs, the equipment of laboratories, and the expansion of the collections of specialist libraries were all very timely.

**'OUR SCIENTIFIC LIFE ANYWAY IS IN CLOSEST CONNECTION WITH THE GERMAN AND SHOWS THE GREATEST SIMILARITIES WITH IT.'**<sup>17</sup>

'Our scientific life anyway is in closest connection with the German and shows the greatest similarities with it'<sup>18</sup> wrote Zoltán Magyary in 1927. His statement clearly reflects the fact that technical higher education in Hungary, due to our common historical past, from among the Anglo-Saxon, French, and German higher education systems, was modelled on the German one. The German connection was also strengthened by the fact, that from the middle of the nineteenth century, the number of Hungarian students studying abroad had increased as a result of the lack of engineering qualifications in Hungary. After their return to Hungary, these engineers, who had obtained a degree in a German-speaking country and later became prominent professionals, organized engineering education in Hungary from the 1870s onwards, based on their experiences in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.<sup>19</sup> During the period of the Dual Monarchy, foreign scholarship holders also went primarily to German-speaking territories.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these developments, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the University

<sup>15</sup> 1923. évi XXXV. törvény a közszolgálatban álló tisztviselők és egyéb alkalmazottak létszámának csökkentéséről és egyes kapcsolatos intézkedésekről. (Act XXXV of 1923 on the reduction of the number of civil servants and other employees in public service and certain related measures). <https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torveny?docid=92300035.TV&searchUrl=/ezer-ev-torvenyei%3Fpagenum%3D39> (Last download: 26 April 2021.)

<sup>16</sup> Schimanek Emil rector magnificus beszámoló beszéde az 1923/24. tanévről. (Speech by Rector Magnificus Emil Schimanek Reporting on the 1923/24 Academic Year). In: *A M. Kir. József-Műegyetem 1924/25. tanévének megnyitásakor 1924. október hó 12-én tartott beszéd.* Budapest, Pátria Irodalmi Vállalat és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság, 1925, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Magyary *op. cit.* 1927, 148.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Tarr, Attila Szilárd: Vándorévek külföldön. A Budapesti Műszaki Egyetem hallgatóinak és tanárainak tanulmányúttjai 1899 és 1914 között. *Gerundium*, No. 3. 2017, 35–43., 37. Several members of the founding generation of the University of Technology obtained their degrees or pursued university studies at foreign universities. The renowned architect Alajos Hauszmann (1847–1926) studied in Berlin, while Frigyes Schulek (1841–1919), Imre Steindl (1839–1902) and Samu Pecz (1854–1922) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. From among the chemical engineers, Vince Wartha (1844–1914) studied in Hungary but completed his studies in Zurich and Heidelberg.

<sup>20</sup> Tarr *op. cit.* 2017, 40.

of Technology traditionally had a closer professional connection with independent German, Austrian, and Swiss technical universities and colleges founded in the nineteenth century, which were not affiliated with universities.

Due to the difficult economic, social, and political situation following the First World War, the problems of German technical higher education, and the growing and highly successful American higher education and research network from the turn of the century, the University of Technology sought to open up not only to Western Europe but also to other continents, primarily the United States from the 1920s onwards. Although its education system was fundamentally different from the American system – where the Anglo-Saxon university model was characteristic – profitability, a performance-oriented approach, and practical skills proved to be a model ‘to be learned’ both in domestic industry and in engineering education closely related to it.

Unlike European technical universities that followed a German model, the number of independent technical universities in the United States was particularly low, despite the fact that the country had a significant number of higher education institutions: in 1923, there were around 110 universities in the country,<sup>21</sup> while there were 23 in Germany, 4 in Austria, and 7 in Switzerland.<sup>22</sup> However, only a fraction of the 110



View of the historic campus of the University of Technology from Gellért Hill (1926). Source: Fortepan / BME Topotéka, 44911

universities were independent technical higher education institutions. It was much more common that technical faculties or institutions were established within individual universities.

In addition to the organizational structure, there were also considerable differences between American and Hungarian engineering education. The former, just like university education in general, had a more practical approach, from which it directly followed that less emphasis was placed on theoretical studies. The training, corresponding to industrial needs, focused on solving practical problems and laboratory work.

By contrast, engineering education in Hungary focused rather on acquiring the basic scientific knowledge and paid less attention to gaining direct industrial experience. Education in Hungary traditionally followed a theoretical approach strongly based on the knowledge of mathematics and physics. These

differences are clearly illustrated by the account of a Hungarian engineer researching on a scholarship in the United States: ‘The technical education system here [at the University of Minnesota, The Institute of Technology] differs significantly from that at home [...] The number of experiments and laboratory exercises to be performed by students is significantly higher than at our technical university. There are many elective courses, most of which are not strictly technical in nature, but cover legal or economic issues related to the engineering profession in accordance with practical requirements. [...] However, from a theoretical and scientific point of view, our university is somewhat superior to the one here.’<sup>23</sup> In the aforementioned debates relating to training reform, speakers urging the greater appreciation of practical experience referred to the American model in many cases.

<sup>21</sup> Statement prepared by the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation under the League of Nations. *Société des Nations. Commission de Coopération Intellectuelle. Procès-verbaux de la Deuxième Session.* [s.l.], Société des Nations, 1923, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Magyary *op cit.* 1927, 148–149. Concerning technical colleges and universities of technology: there were 10 independent universities of technology in Germany and 2 in Austria. Magyary *op.cit.* 1927, 186.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Juhász Kálmán János Smith Jeremiás ösztöndíjas mérnök útibeszámolója’. HU-BME L, JNMGH RH, 4/c, 1. cs. 180. sz./1935 1938/1928. 2–3. Juhász Kálmán János kir. főmérnök Smith ösztöndíjas jelentése munkásságáról. 21 May 1928.

## GUARD ON THE BORDER BETWEEN THE BALKANS AND THE WEST<sup>24</sup>

The sentence quoted in the subtitle comes from Kornél Zelovich, rector of the University of Technology in office between 1921 and 1923, who was referring to the regional role of technical education in Hungary between the two world wars. Until the end of the First World War, the University of Technology paid attention primarily to the part of Europe to the west of Hungary – to Vienna, Berlin, and Zurich. However, following the Treaty of Trianon, the university found itself in a new situation, and its mission gained a new meaning: after its international repositioning which began in the 1920s, it no longer sought primarily to adopt Western models, but also to maintain its cultural and technical superiority over the newly formed neighbouring states.

In the period following the First World War, the Czechoslovak, Romanian, and Yugoslavian successor states clearly worked to lay the foundations for their own technical higher education systems with a national character. After the First World War, for example, the long-established University of Technology in Prague played a central role in technical higher education in Czechoslovakia, where instruction was originally conducted in German and later simultaneously in German and Czech. The other Czechoslovak technical higher education institution, the State Technical College (Štátna vysoká škola technická), based in

Bratislava, was founded in 1937 and later became the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (Slovenská technická univerzita v Bratislave).

The legal predecessor of the University of Technology of Bucharest, founded in the mid nineteenth century, was reorganized in 1920 as the Technical College of Bucharest (Politehnica din București). At the turn of the century, the plan for the University of Technology of Timișoara (then Temesvár), promoted primarily by Kornél Zelovich, was first delayed because of the war and then failed. Instead, under the auspices of the new Romanian successor state, the Technical College of Timișoara (Scoala Politehnica din Timisoara) was opened in 1920. In contrast to the Romanian and Czechoslovak examples, in the Yugoslav region, in Belgrade and Zagreb, technical education was organized within the framework of universities (as technical faculties), following the German university model of the time, rather than as independent institutions.<sup>25</sup>

Seeing this tendency, the technical intelligentsia in Hungary also reacted, although not without sharp words. The general contemporary opinion was that although the successor states had devoted considerable resources to establishing new institutions or transforming existing institutional networks founded during the Dual Monarchy, the lack of decades of experience, highly qualified teachers, and receptive, well-prepared students slowed down this process. The speech opening

the 1924 academic year, delivered by Emil Schimanek, rector of the University of Technology, can be considered a summary of this professional consensus: '[...] the lack of a scientific team cannot be remedied in a short time, because this requires decades of cultural work and an appropriate cultural atmosphere. It is pointless to send dozens of talented young people abroad, and no matter how perfectly they train themselves there, if, upon their return, they do not find the level of general culture without which the work of a scientist is fruitless, they will be like a seed sown in barren soil'.<sup>26</sup>

## SUMMARY

During the interwar period, the development of Hungarian technical higher education was determined primarily by organizational changes, infrastructural backwardness, a lack of financial resources, and the search for a balance between theoretical and practical training. During this period, the University of Technology strove to maintain its leading position in the region and preserve its academic prestige despite the changed political and economic circumstances. After the First World War, the institution sought to maintain its key role in technical higher education in Central Europe. As far as international influences were concerned, although German influence remained dominant, the interest of Hungarian engineers gradually turned towards the American model of technical higher education and scientific life.

<sup>24</sup> Zelovich *op. cit.* 1922, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Magyary *op.cit.* 1927, 213.

<sup>26</sup> Schimanek Emil rector magnificus beszámoló beszéde az 1923/24. tanévről. (Speech by Rector Magnificus Emil Schimanek Reporting on the 1923/24 Academic Year). In: A M. Kir. József-Műegyetem 1924/25. tanévének megnyitásakor 1924. október hó 12-én tartott beszéd. Budapest, Pátria Irodalmi Vállalat és Nyomdai Résztvénytársaság, 1925, 9.

Zoltán Nagymihály

# Refugees, Émigrés, and the Diaspora: Hungarians Abroad

An Outline of the Historiography of Hungarian Communities in the West After 1945



The text below offers a brief overview of the scholarly literature dealing with the Hungarian population in the West after 1945. In its use of terminology it strives for consistency: its subject is not only the 'emigration' – which denotes the group of people who went into exile for political reasons, in protest against the dictatorship of the time, and who, in their new place of residence, continued activities directed against the regime at home – but the entirety of 'Hungarians in the West'. This study is necessarily and deliberately broad-brush: it is a shortened version of the first, historiographically themed chapter of the author's forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE HUNGARIAN COMMUNITY ABROAD: GENERATIONS, REFUGEES, ÉMIGRÉS

From the final phase of the Second World War onwards, the Hungarian émigrés who arrived in the West in successive waves

never formed a unified group. Serious disagreements arose on many questions between, on the one hand, those who arrived or were driven abroad in large numbers at the end of the war – or during its last months – and remained in the West (known as 'the '45ers'), and, on the other, those who initially stayed in Hungary and accepted certain elements of the new system, but later fled the unfolding dictatorship ('the '47ers'). The great majority of the former were not Arrow Cross supporters; many had gone to the West simply to escape the looming Soviet occupation. The latter, for their part, were by no means communist collaborators, but Hungarians who had for a time taken part in the post-war, multi-party political scene and had hoped that it might endure.

Survey works on the nature of emigration appeared even in the first years. János Ölvedi – who had served during the war as a young ministry official and as press attaché at various embassies – characterized the

new wave of émigrés in two mimeographed volumes (*Levelek a számkivetésből* [Letters from Exile], 1947; and *Az ismeretlen légió* [The Unknown Legion], 1948). He identified the most important task of every émigré community as expressing that which could not be expressed at home, representing the ideas that flowed from them, and registering protest against the dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> He distinguished between the 'refugee' and the 'émigré', describing the formation of the latter as both an intellectual and a social process – 'the awakening of self-consciousness among Hungarians in flight.'<sup>2</sup> He warned those groups committed to various theories of legal continuity that what mattered was not constitutional argumentation but international recognition; in doing so he essentially came out in support of the Magyar Nemzeti Bizottmány [Hungarian National Committee], founded by representatives of the post-1945 coalition parties and enjoying American backing.<sup>3</sup> These ideas were taken further by the linguist Elemér Bakó in *A műhely és*

<sup>1</sup> Ölvedi, János: *Levelek a számkivetésből*. München, 1947, 48., 142.

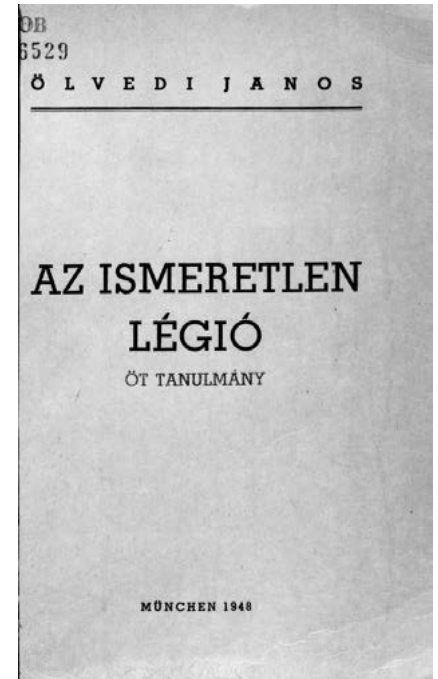
<sup>2</sup> Ölvedi, János: *Az ismeretlen légió. Öt tanulmány*. München, 1948, 5., 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 36–37. The Hungarian National Committee regarded itself as a kind of 'émigré parliament,' while its Executive Committee viewed itself as an 'émigré government.' Its founding document was signed by five former leading Hungarian politicians: Tibor Eckhardt, Ferenc Nagy, Béla Varga, Dezső Sulyok, and Zoltán Pfeiffer. Béla Varga, as Speaker of the National Assembly elected in 1945, declared the HNC (MNB) established in July 1948 and became its president. Although the organisation admitted representatives of the '39, '45, and '47 émigré waves, it consisted overwhelmingly of members and supporters of the political parties of the post-1945 coalition. Fábán, Béla: *From Chicago to Williamsburg. Four Years of the Hungarian National Committee*. New York, Hungarian National Committee, 1951, pp. 1–14.

a légió [The Workshop and the Legion], which reminded those in exile that leaving the country had, in effect, been a decision, as well as the assumption of a mission – and that one day they would have to stand before those who had suffered at home and give an account of their activities abroad.<sup>4</sup> Nearly a decade after the arrival of the first refugees, the young sociologist István Mustó published a booklet – no longer mimeographed like the earlier works, but in rudimentary print – that painted a bleak picture of the situation of Western Hungarians. He considered it unrealistic to expect the long-term preservation of Hungarian national identity, cooperation among the various émigré groups, or that, in the event of liberation, these groups would have any voice in shaping Hungary's future.<sup>5</sup> This question – the return of the émigrés and their potential political role at home in the event of liberation – remained a topic of debate for a long time afterwards, though naturally with diminishing plausibility as the years passed.

The otherwise high-quality works produced in these early years were primarily self-reflective and analytical in nature, and lacked a fully academic character. That latter ambition was taken up by two authors who themselves belonged to the émigré community and took part in its debates: Kázmér Nagy, editor of the *Dél Keresztje* [Southern Cross] and later *Független Magyarország* [Independent Hungary] in Sydney,

and, in Munich, Gyula Borbándi, editor of *Látóhatár* [Horizon] and later *Új Látóhatár* [New Horizon]. Despite their similar situations, the two assessments diverged entirely. Nagy sought to stage a funeral for the émigré community and demonstrate the complete failure of the whole enterprise; as a result, he received sharp criticism from Western Hungarians. At home, however, he was recognized, and not long afterwards he returned to Hungary for personal and political reasons. His book was published in Budapest as well, in a third, revised edition.<sup>6</sup> Borbándi, by contrast, strove for objectivity. He processed an enormous body of documentation and, with the highest degree of scholarly rigour possible at the time, produced an outstanding synthesis relating the history of the post-1945 emigration. On certain points the two authors reached similar conclusions: they demarcated the generational cohorts of émigrés in the same way (distinguishing the '44/'45ers from the '47ers, and both from those who fled in the wake of the 1956 revolution); they considered 1963–64 a turning point – the removal of the 'Hungarian question' from the agenda of the United Nations – as well as 1975, the year of the Helsinki Final Act and of the death of Cardinal József Mindszenty, who spent his final years in exile. For Nagy, every group came off badly: he labelled the '45ers as German-leaning, the '47ers as forgetful of geopolitical realities, and the '56ers as incapable of forming an independent pole of



Cover page of János Ölvedi's early edition of his treatise on emigration, entitled *The Unknown Legion* (1948). Photo credit: National Széchényi Library

influence.<sup>7</sup> Borbándi, by contrast, showed understanding toward all: he acknowledged that the fears of the '45ers regarding repatriation were not unfounded; he enumerated at length the merits of the '47ers (among whom he himself belonged); and he praised the '56ers for their attachment to the Hungarian language and culture.<sup>8</sup> Their overall assessments also diverged completely: according to Nagy, the post-1945 émigrés 'entered the service of retrograde forces', whereas Borbándi held that their achievements in no regard fell short of those of earlier generations.<sup>9</sup> The two authors also drew different conclusions about the future of Hungarians in the West: in Nagy's view, the activities of the 'political émigrés' had become pointless;<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Bakó, Elemér: *A műhely és a légió. Tanulmányok*. Munich, 1949, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Mustó, István: *Az elveszett nemzet. Reflexiók a magyar emigrációról*. Köln/Rhein, Páztortűz, 1954, 6–22.

<sup>6</sup> Kunz, Egon: *Magyarok Ausztráliában*. Budapest, Teleki László Alapítvány, 1997, 187–188.

<sup>7</sup> Nagy, Kázmér: *Elveszett alkotmány. Vázlat az 1944 és 1964 közötti magyar politikai emigráció kialakulásáról*. München, Aurora, 1974, 24–74.; Nagy Kázmér: *Elveszett alkotmány. A hidegháború és a magyar politikai emigráció 1945–1975 között*. London, 1982, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: *A magyar emigráció életrajza, 1945–1985*. Bern, Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem (EPMSZ), 1985, 13., 412.

<sup>9</sup> Nagy *op. cit.* 1982, 6.; Borbándi *op. cit.* 1985, 447.

<sup>10</sup> Nagy *op. cit.* 1974, 32.; Nagy *op. cit.* 1982, 89., 126.

Borbándi argued instead that only their character had changed and that their history could not be considered finished. Even so, he recognized that the shifting circumstances pointed toward a weakening of political engagement and a strengthening of cultural and oppositional identity rather than outright resistance – a development reflected in the increasingly common use of terms such as ‘Hungarians in the West’, ‘diaspora’, and ‘scattered Hungarians’, and the retreat of the term ‘emigration’.<sup>11</sup> Yet the closing remarks of the two works hint at a certain convergence of thought. In his Budapest edition, Nagy wrote that ‘Hungarians living in the homeland and scattered across the five continents can now seek answers to their questions by helping one another.’<sup>12</sup> Borbándi, for his part, emphasized that the post-1945 émigrés ‘reflected Hungarian society and its cross-section; and if they had faults, weaknesses, shortcomings, or sins, these burden the whole of Hungarian society – just as their virtues and successes serve the good of the Hungarian people as a whole.’<sup>13</sup>

### THE FIRST STEPS IN THE RECEPTION OF THE EMIGRATION AT HOME

In 1970 a work was published under the descriptive, judgement-free title of *Magyarok a nagyvilágban* [Hungarians

Around the World]. It was written by Miklós Szántó, editor of *Magyar Hírek* [Hungarian News] – a periodical published by the Magyarok Világszövetsége [World Federation of Hungarians] and circulated within émigré circles with what were clearly propagandistic aims. Naturally, the book cannot be regarded as an objective scholarly work, yet it does indicate the main contours of the Kádár era’s more differentiated and consciously crafted image of the émigrés, an image that held out greater potential benefits for the communist authorities than that of its predecessor. According to Szántó, for instance, there existed émigrés who had earned distinction for themselves – such as the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi, or the prime minister (later president of the republic) during the 1918 Aster Revolution, Mihály Károlyi – and who had left the country because of outrages suffered during the Rákosi period. The book also signalled a degree of ‘leniency’: it maintained that the ‘45 wave did not consist solely of Arrow Cross members, that the ‘47 cohort did not consist solely of ‘reactionary’ politicians, and that the majority of the ‘56ers were not ‘counter-revolutionaries’ but rather misguided individuals who had since repaired their relationship with ‘People’s Hungary’.<sup>14</sup> Despite this apparent attempt at rapprochement, more than

a decade would still have to pass after the publication of Szántó’s book before those labelled as ‘members of the former ruling classes and right-wing politicians’ could voice their own views to the Hungarian public. The sociologist Tibor Huszár, who studied interwar movements, conducted interviews in the autumn of 1977 with several leading émigré figures, yet the texts of these interviews could not be published until 1983. He spoke to writers belonging to the ‘47 cohort, including László Cs. Szabó and Gyula Gombos, and former politicians such as Imre Kovács and Ferenc Nagy. The series also included conversations with the historian and writer Ferenc Fejtő, who had left the country as far back as the Horthy era; with Sándor Kiss, a Smallholders’ Party politician of the 1956 cohort; and with the publisher Sándor Püski, who had been permitted to emigrate legally in 1970.<sup>15</sup> The discussion with the London-based writer Zoltán Szabó, however, was not published,<sup>16</sup> and the interviewer was obliged to steer clear of many taboos arising from post-1945 Hungarian history. Even so, the book introduced numerous new insights to interested Hungarian readers. Contrary to the official Marxist historical narrative, it publicly acknowledged the fundamentally *népi* (populist<sup>17</sup>) rather than communist character of the March Front, the genuine

<sup>11</sup> Borbándi *op. cit.* 1985, 89., 126., 429–447.

<sup>12</sup> Nagy Kázmér: *Elveszett alkotmány. A magyar politikai emigráció, 1945–1975.* Budapest, Gondolat, 1984, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Borbándi *op. cit.* 1985, 448.

<sup>14</sup> Szántó, Miklós: *Magyarok a nagyvilágban.* Budapest, Kossuth, 1970, 11., 153–166.

<sup>15</sup> Huszár, Tibor: *Beszélgetések.* Budapest, Magvető, 1983.

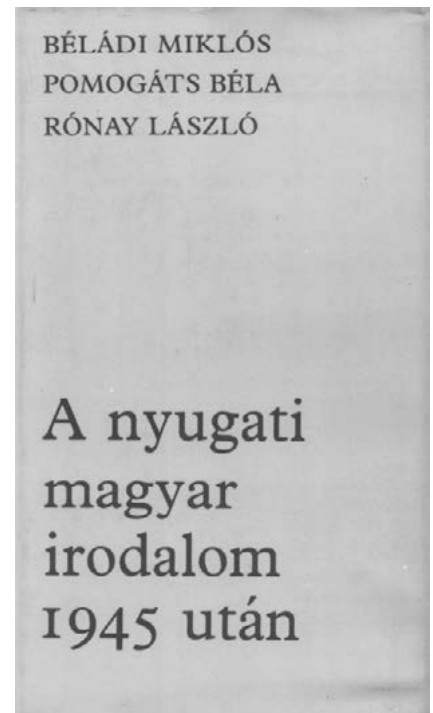
<sup>16</sup> The interview with her and several Hungarian intellectuals living in Hungary was only published long after the change of regime: Huszár, Tibor: *Találkozások. Beszélgetések a két világháború közötti magyar szellemi-politikai mozgalmakról.* Budapest, Corvina, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> According to Gyula Borbándi, we use the term *populist* in its original, not in the meaning applied in Western discourse. The Hungarian movement originally focused on the fate of the peasantry and, in a broader sense, emphasized both the respect for individual civil liberties and the importance of social thought and national interests. For Gyula Borbándi, populism meant a movement that different from all other literary and political currents, varying from country to country, but in certain issues akin to each other. For more, see: Borbándi, Gyula: A populizmus jelentésváltozásáról. *Hitel*, 1990. 12. 12. 59–60.; Borbándi, Gyula: *Der ungarische Populismus.* München, Aurora Bücher, 1976. About the various meanings of populism, see: *A népszerűség*

values of the *népi* movement, and the role of Ferenc Erdei – a figure viewed with at least cautious scepticism by émigrés.<sup>18</sup> The interviews also discussed periodicals such as *Új Látóhatár*,<sup>19</sup> which at home was hidden away in the closed collections of libraries, and Gyula Gombos's three-edition monograph on Dezső Szabó.<sup>20</sup> In his typically objective review of Huszár's book, Gyula Borbándi criticized chiefly certain passages in the Afterword, which he believed were intended to 'reassure those made uneasy by the volume's contents'.<sup>21</sup> It is also a fact that Huszár conspicuously left individuals' reasons for leaving the country undiscussed, referring only vaguely to 'profound social transformations' and the 'consequences of the Cold War', which had 'swept' the interviewees 'to the other side of the barricades'.<sup>22</sup>

The most important – and most hotly debated – area of the pre-1989 reception of the emigration was literature. This is hardly surprising once we grasp the close connection between politics and literature in exile, which Gyula Borbándi summed up by saying that in exile 'the spoken and written word becomes a political act'.<sup>23</sup> The appearance in 1981 of *Vándorének* [Wandering Song], the first anthology of Hungarian poets in the West to be published in Hungary, and, five years later,

of *A nyugati magyar irodalom 1945 után* [Hungarian Literature in the West After 1945], sought to present to Hungarian readers a field that until then had been almost entirely untouched and silenced – and at the same time to signal the intention to reach a rapprochement with those in exile.<sup>24</sup> One of the main initiators of these volumes was Miklós Béládi, literary historian and the most highly regarded Hungarian expert on the subject. Béládi preferred the term 'Hungarians in the West', arguing that the label 'émigré literature' applied only to the first 'Cold War' decades after 1945. By the late 1970s, for Hungarian communities outside the Carpathian Basin, he considered the term 'diaspora' more appropriate.<sup>25</sup> The volumes were far from unanimously praised among émigrés themselves; many objected to what they saw as politically motivated judgements on the authors presented. The thematic range, too, was felt to be one-sided: the poems selected by Béládi largely evoke nostalgia, the difficulties of diaspora life, the positive experience of home visits, the problems of alienness and preserving the mother tongue, and the passing of the first émigré generation. The literary history published after Béládi's death – in contrast to *Vándorének* – attracted even more criticism. Reviewers agreed



The front cover of the controversial volume *Western Hungarian Literature after 1945*, by literary historians Miklós Béládi, Béla Pomogáts, and László Rónay (1986). Photo credit: Szaktárs Database.

that the main virtue of the book was simply that it existed; yet the passions it provoked, often descending into personal attacks, revealed that most people had expected far more from it. Two émigrés of 1956, the distinguished poet-linguist Ádám Makkai and the writer György Ferdinandy, wrote in *Szivárvány* [Rainbow], a Hungarian literary journal published in the United States, that it was absurd for literary historians in Hungary to analyse books and journals which, in Hungary itself, were still largely

átka. *Portrék, ideológiák, programok a populizmus múltjáról és jelenéből*. Ed. Heil, Kristóf – Petri, Bernadett. Budapest, Alapjogokért Központ – Polgári Magyarországért Alapítvány – Christian Demoratic Institute, 2023. (I thank my colleague, Vivien Rapali, for her help in preparing this note.)

<sup>18</sup> Huszár *op. cit.* 1983, 103–112., 153., 210–254., 326–430.

<sup>19</sup> For more, see: Borbándi Gyula: 'Egy irodalombarát vámos'. *Új Magyarország*, 1991. 10. 05. 9. (With thanks to my colleague Barnabás Pálincás for bringing this text to my attention.)

<sup>20</sup> Gombos, Gyula: *Szabó Dezső*. München, Aurora, 1966, 1969.; New York, Püski, 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: 'Olvasónapló. Huszár Tibor: Beszélgetések'. *Új Látóhatár*, 1984/2, 229–234.

<sup>22</sup> Huszár *op. cit.* 1983, 464–465.

<sup>23</sup> Borbándi *op. cit.* 1985, 58–59.

<sup>24</sup> *Vándorének. Nyugat-európai és tengerentúli magyar költők*. Ed. Béládi, Miklós. Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1981.; Béládi, Miklós – Pomogáts, Béla – Rónay, László: *A nyugati magyar irodalom 1945 után*. Budapest, Gondolat, 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Béládi, Miklós: 'Bevezetés a nyugati magyar irodalomba'. *Jelenkor*, 1981/7, 683–706.



József Nyirő in Transylvania in the 1930s, before his emigration. His reintegration into the Hungarian public discourse after 1990 took a long time. Photo credit: Store Norge Leksikon

banned and inaccessible.<sup>26</sup> Western Hungarian critics also complained that authors who frequently travelled home received more favourable treatment; that works related to 1956 and to communist crimes remained taboo; and that conservative writers and those who had openly opposed the communist system continued to be marginalized or treated with ironic condescension. One of the poets criticized in the volume, György Faludy, responded to its shortcomings with characteristic bluntness, describing the authors as follows: 'In recent decades they have lived in considerable isolation from the world, amid the constant blare of propaganda, and at the same time their own political opportunism has adversely affected their capacity for thought. They are therefore not entirely responsible for what they write, for they have become dulled and coarsened. They deserve our pity mixed

with contempt, rather than our anger.'<sup>27</sup>

The sharp tone of these critiques was probably prompted less by the book's actual content than by its belatedness, and by the 'mutual suspicions' that had accumulated around the subject over previous decades. The critiques did not go unanswered in Hungary: in *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], at the turn of 1987–88, the two co-editors and literary historians, Béla Pomogáts and László Rónay, responded with palpable resentment, going so far as to claim – owing to the shortcomings of the literary criticism directed at them – that 'in truth, there is no Hungarian literature in the West' at all. In this debate – where Western voices such as György Ferdinandy and Tibor Papp, founder of the *Magyar Műhely* [Hungarian Workshop] in Paris, were also able to speak – it was, interestingly, a Hungarian literary historian at home, Lajos Szokolczay, who delivered the sharpest criticism of the volume, fully understanding the émigrés' fierce but natural reactions.<sup>28</sup>

#### EMIGRATION AND POST-EMIGRATION – THE ERA OF REGIME CHANGE

In October 1989, the month in which the Republic of Hungary was proclaimed, the Debrecen Literary Days event took 'Hungarian literature in the West' as its theme – the first occasion on which writers at home and in the West could finally exchange views about the evolving history

of the émigrés' reception in Hungary. In his opening address, Béla Pomogáts – evidently having moved beyond earlier resentments – praised émigré literature as a sphere in which full cultural freedom had prevailed, without party-controlled literary organs, and where periodicals had been able to provide reliable information about recent history and give prominent attention to national questions that had at home been treated only superficially (such as the situation of Hungarians beyond the borders).<sup>29</sup> As a gesture of official recognition, Tibor Cseres, who had been elected president of the Hungarian Writers' Union in 1986, announced that at its November 1989 meeting the Union would amend its statutes to allow any writer living outside Hungary to become a member. At the same time, Cseres noted that there were still those whom Hungarian public opinion – and indeed many present at the debate – would be unwilling to accept, naming in particular two Transylvanian writers of the '45 cohort, József Nyirő and Albert Wass.<sup>30</sup>

Already in the years of transition, a number of works could be published in Hungary which, because they diverged from the Marxist conception of history dominant under the Kádár regime, had previously stood no chance of seeing print. These were the first to showcase the body of knowledge accumulated during the decades in exile and now, at last, made accessible

<sup>26</sup> Makkai, Ádám: 'Gogol „Holt lelkei” a pesti árverésen. Reflexiók Béládi Miklós, Pomogáts Béla és Rónay György A nyugati magyar irodalom 1945 után (lektorálta: Szabolcsi, Miklós és Czigány, Lóránt) c. irodalomtörténeti hiánycikkének időigényes bepótlási kísérletére'. *Szivárvány*, 1987/2, [77–98.] 98.; Ferdinandy, György: 'Politika és irodalom'. *Szivárvány*, 1987/2, [153–156.] 153.

<sup>27</sup> Faludy, György: 'Életforma reménytelensége?' *Szivárvány*, 1987/2, 151–153.

<sup>28</sup> Pomogáts, Béla: 'Rögzíteni a tanulságokat'. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1987. 12. 04. 5.; Szokolczay Lajos: 'Létezik. Töprengés a nyugati magyar irodalomról'. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1988. 01. 29. 4.; Rónay László: 'Irodalom, erkölcs, más egyéb'. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1988. 01. 29. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Pomogáts, Béla: 'A nyugati magyar irodalom a kirekesztéstől a befogadásig. Irodalom a szétszóródásban'. *Alföld*, 1990/2, 41–53.

<sup>30</sup> Cseres, Tibor: 'Minden magyar író a szövetség tagja lehet'. *Alföld*, 1990/2, 96.

to readers at home. (Tellingly, several of the books in this category first appeared in Hungary through the rapidly expanding samizdat publishers.) Among the works issued were Gyula Borbándi's study assessing the true significance of the *népi* movement and his synthesis of the history of émigré community; Béla Szász's personally authentic account as a convicted defendant in the Rajk trial; Tibor Méray's biography of Imre Nagy, written by the Paris-based editor-in-chief of *Irodalmi Újság* [Literary Newspaper]; the historian Péter Gosztonyi's evaluations of the 1956 Revolution; and documentary collections on the press coverage of the Revolution.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it was the *disappearance* of the émigré community that made possible a genuine domestic discourse about it. Between 1989 and 1999, several volumes of interviews appeared, enabling numerous (former) émigré figures to 'introduce themselves' to a broader public. Miklós Györffy published conversations with key figures in émigré political thought, Csaba Gülch with the most significant representatives of émigré literature, and György Éger with community, political, and intellectual leaders of Hungarian communities in the West then facing new challenges. Through these interviews, the reading public could acquaint itself with a wide range of views on the nature

and activity of émigrés; with differing attitudes towards host societies; with reflections on the challenges posed by the turn of the century and by the new Hungarian situation; with accounts of radically transformed relations with Hungary and of the domestic changes under way; and with thoughts about the tasks facing Western Hungarians.<sup>32</sup>

The most intense debates in the West likewise centred on whether the émigré community had come to an end or continued to exist. Árpád Horváth, a contributor to the Rome-based *Katolikus Szemle* [Catholic Review], put it aptly when he observed that exile is a mode of existence whose very aim is to bring about its own cessation.<sup>33</sup> In the textbook sense, the history of the émigré community undeniably concluded with the political transition: the dictatorial system against which it had drawn its legitimacy collapsed at home. In practice, however, the transformation was far from seamless. Those who argued for the continued relevance of the concept of emigration tended to equate it with political activity carried out in the interest of the Hungarian nation – an activity still needed, they maintained, above all to support the self-determination of Hungarians living in neighbouring states and to assist the development of the mother country. Most, however, accepted the original

meaning of the term 'émigré' and henceforth spoke simply of 'Hungarians abroad' or 'Hungarians in the West'. This did *not* imply any turning away from the homeland or from Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin. On the contrary: many felt that what was lacking from Hungary and its new political leadership was clarity about the areas in which the former émigrés could be of the greatest assistance. Gyula Borbándi used the term 'post-emigration' to summarize these phenomena: 'There is, therefore, an emigration. Not because the political situation demands it, or because the émigré status – in Hungarian terms – could expect any particular recognition abroad, but because not only certain politicians, but numerous members of Western Hungarian institutions and organizations continue, consistently, to call themselves émigrés.' Thus the issue was not criticism of the new system or government in Hungary, but rather a kind of lingering *illusion* of emigration – a self-conception that, for some, continued to live on.<sup>34</sup>

## LIFE IN THE DIASPORA

The process of the émigré community's dissolution – or at least its loosening – had already begun before the political transition in Hungary. Several independent groups sought new paths for Hungarians in the West, breaking with the inherent

<sup>31</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: *A magyar népi mozgalom*. New York, Püski-Corvin, 1983., Budapest, Püski, 1989.; Savarius, Vincent [Szász Béla]: *Minden kényszer nélkül. Egy műper kortörténete*. Brussels, Nagy Imre Intézet, 1963., Szász, Béla: *Minden kényszer nélkül*. Budapest, Európa, 1989.; Méray, Tibor: *Nagy Imre élete és halála*. Munich, Újváry Griff, 1981., Budapest, Bibliotéka, 1989.; Gosztonyi Péter: *Föltámadott a tenger... 1956*. Munich, Herp, 1989, Szombathely, Népszava, 1990.; 1956. *A forradalom sajtója*. Ed. Nagy, Ernő. Giromagny, 1983., Budapest, Tudósítások, 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Györffy, Miklós: *Akkor is hazafiak. Emigráns-interjúk*. Budapest, Új Idő, 1990.; Gülch, Csaba: *Az Idő fénylő nyoma. Interjúk tengeren innenről és túlról*. Győr, Széchenyi, 1992.; Éger, György: *Otthon és itthon. Beszélgetések nyugati magyarokkal*. Budapest, Anonymus, 1995.; Éger, György: *Megálmodott Magyarország. Beszélgetés nyugati magyarokkal*. Bázél-Budapest, EPMSZ, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Horváth, Árpád: 'A mai helyzet Magyarországon és az emigráció'. *Katolikus Szemle*, 1989/2–3, [100–112.] 108–109.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance: Borbándi, Gyula: *Alkony és derengés. Írások a posztemigrációról*. Lakitelek, Antológia, 1999, 42–53.



A cover page of the journal *Itt-Ott* (1972–1973), which embraced the concept of diaspora consciousness. Photo credit: Hungaricana Database.

problems of emigration, including its temporary nature and its inability to be passed on meaningfully to subsequent generations. These groups emphasized the importance of cultural work rather than political resistance, placing at the centre of their activity not protest against the dictatorship at home but the deepening of Hungarian identity and its nourishment among later generations. Károly Nagy, an émigré of '56 and a teacher at the weekend Hungarian school in New Brunswick, was willing to turn to domestic forums and respected intellectuals – such as Zoltán Kodály, Mihály Váci, and Gyula Illyés – for help in supporting the preservation of the mother tongue. His efforts, begun in the mid-1960s, eventually led to the launch of the Anyanyelvi Konferenciák [Mother Tongue Conferences], which were viewed with

considerable controversy within the émigré community.<sup>35</sup> Similarly 'issue-focused' was the activity of the Committee for Human Rights in Romania (CHRR), and later the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation (HHRF), both established and led by László Hámos, born in the West to '45 émigré parents. The organization spoke out primarily on behalf of Hungarians beyond Hungary's borders, organizing demonstrations, lobbying, and collecting petitions in the United States and Canada. It sought to draw the attention of Western public opinion – and of those in power at home – to a national cause of exceptional importance.<sup>36</sup>

The most deliberate break with the 'émigré way of life' was carried out by the members of *Itt-Ott* [Here and There], founded in 1967 as a correspondence forum among Hungarian Americans, and by the *Magyar Baráti Közösség* [Hungarian Friends' Circle] that later formed around it. From the late 1960s onward, its founders and leading figures emphasized the importance of cultivating a diaspora identity. In contrast to the émigré community, the key bastions of the diaspora were far less newspapers, journals, or national committees meant to represent Hungarian interests, and far more scouting organizations, churches, and Sunday schools.<sup>37</sup> The principal guardians and advocates of this 'consciousness of dispersion' committed themselves to the spiritual mission of a nation that

had by now become a worldwide Hungarian community, to drawing on the possibilities afforded by dispersal, and to preserving and developing connections between Hungarians.<sup>38</sup> They argued that wherever Hungarians may live in the world, they can experience their attachment to Hungarian identity naturally and authentically. Their thinking centred not on territory or circumstances but on individuals and communities, and they actively sought contact and opportunities for intellectual exchange with Hungarians living in very different situations. A similar – though less well known and less long-lived – initiative can be found in Western Europe. This was the group associated with the Magyar Katolikus Misszió [Hungarian Catholic Mission, Munich] and later the Münchener Magyar Intézet [Hungarian Institute, Munich], linked to the historian Zsolt K. Lengyel, which used free universities as a forum to explore possibilities for shaping a Hungarian identity in Western Europe.<sup>39</sup> In a study published in 1986, Lengyel analyzed the simultaneous 'émigré' and 'national minority' character of Hungarian communities in the West, concluding that the two modes of being – each implying distinct tasks and possibilities – would have to complement each other in the future. The task, he argued, was to create natural communities, thereby establishing a kind of 'self-governing' communal existence,

<sup>35</sup> Borbándi *op. cit.* 1985, 431–446.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 426–429.; Ludányi, András: *Amerikai életutam*. Somorja, Méry Ratio, 2020, 93–95.

<sup>37</sup> Ludányi, András: 'A szétszórtsági tudat létrejötté Magyar Amerikában'. *Korunk*, 2015/3, 4–12.

<sup>38</sup> Cseh, Tibor: *Csernántól a Reménység táváig. Válogatott írások*. Ed. Ludányi, András. Budapest, Fekete Sas, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> K. Lengyel, Zsolt: *Emigráció, szórvány, hungarológia. Válogatott írások, 1985–2012*. Budapest, Ráció, 2013, 12–20.

and to draw conclusions from the likelihood of a permanent Western presence.<sup>40</sup> In an interview conducted after the political transition, the author reflected that when the idea of a national-minority mode of existence was first proposed, political change still seemed remote, yet in the years following the transition, the legitimacy of emigration itself had clearly become doubtful. 'The dissolving emigration has, as it were, dragged a significant portion of the cultural diaspora down with it,' he remarked, referring to the closure of important institutions or their relocation to Hungary.<sup>41</sup>

There exists no more comprehensive account of post-1945 émigré life – or of Hungarians in the West more broadly – than Gyula Borbándi's monumental 1985 study. After living to see the collapse of the communist dictatorship, he published in 1996 what he described as a continuation of that 'biography', covering the final years of the émigré community, both before and after the political transition. He identified the end of the émigré community with the disappearance of the 'virtual Hungary' represented by the émigrés, and with the mandatory acceptance by everyone of the real, existing Hungary. In line with the diaspora-oriented tendencies discussed above, Borbándi urged Hungarians in the West to direct their attention primarily towards themselves: the chief task, he argued, was

to preserve future generations as Hungarians and to serve the future of their own communities; work that 'also renders a good service to Hungary'.<sup>42</sup> While no single overarching history of the émigré community has been written, numerous studies have examined particular regions, émigré groupings, journals, and organizations, while the recollections of individual actors have likewise expanded the material available to us. Particularly noteworthy are the reference works focusing on the key representatives of Hungarian literature in the West, such as the lexicon and bibliography published by Borbándi in 1992, and the similar but more extensive volume edited eight years later by the literary historian Csaba Nagy and issued by the Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum [Petőfi Literary Museum].<sup>43</sup> One new and well-synthesized contribution is the handbook by Béla Nóvé, who, alongside substantial historiographical material, surveyed collections of repatriated and Western sources, as well as a register of life-history interviews spanning the period from the emigration of 1849 to the present day.<sup>44</sup>

'Refugee existence', 'emigration', 'diaspora', 'Hungarians in the West'. In this short overview we have used several terms to describe Hungarians living outside the Carpathian Basin after 1945. In terms of individual lives, these words do not necessarily mark sharply distinct stages or ways

of being. With the welcome broadening of research into the subjects encompassed by these concepts, we are not only seeking to present more accurately a particular chapter of our history, but also to deepen our understanding of a group torn from Hungarian society at distinct moments in time – but nonetheless preserved and clearly bore certain of its characteristics – and to make their achievements visible within public consciousness. The refugee condition shows us the beginnings: the starting point through which the vast majority of those who ended up abroad had to pass, and from which they had to rebuild their lives and their communities. Exiles, with the assumption of political resistance, enjoyed the 'privilege' of being able to represent and disseminate ideas that those who remained at home could not even attempt to express. Over the decades, however, the hope of influencing the situation in Hungary – or even of personally returning home to a free country – steadily diminished. Diaspora life promised, and still promises, the experience of multigenerational identification and the possibility of remaining Hungarian. Its existence, its continuation, the growth of its communities, and the survival of the Hungarian nation as a worldwide people will remain phenomena for future historians – those who will one day study *our* time – to examine.

<sup>40</sup> K. Lengyel, Zsolt: 'Hagyományteremtés'. In: *30 év, 1956–1986*. Ed. Balla, Bálint – Kovács, Andor – Bárczay, Gyula – Steinmann, Judit – Szöllősy, Árpád. Bern, EPMSZ, 1986, 571–598.

<sup>41</sup> Éger *op. cit.* 1999, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: *Emigráció és Magyarország*. Budapest, EPMSZ, 1996.

<sup>43</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: *Nyugati magyar irodalmi lexikon és bibliográfia*. Budapest, Hitel, 1992.; Nagy, Csaba: *A magyar emigráns irodalom lexikona*. Budapest, Argumentum–PIM–Kortárs Irodalmi Központ, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Nóvé, Béla: *Magyar emigrációtörténeti kézikönyv*. Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, 2023.

Balázs Kovács

# A Historiographical Overview of Hungarian Historical Writing, 1948–1953



Before beginning his work, a historian must first clarify for himself what topic and methods he intends to pursue, and what results he expects from his research and the writing that will emerge from it. In accordance with these aims, it is also necessary to clarify the concept of historiography as a discipline,<sup>1</sup> along with its historical background.

The primary task of such a definition is to determine whether the work aims to explore the history of historical writings or the history of historical scholarship. Both fields are referred to by the term ‘historiography’, and although there are very close connections between them, their subjects differ significantly.<sup>2</sup> The practitioner of historiography – unlike, for example, the historian of politics or events, but similarly to the historian of society – should place greater emphasis on the *how* (the manner or means)

rather than on the *who*, *what*, and *when* questions.<sup>3</sup>

Historiographical research is an independent field within the discipline of history, even though every other subfield (political, social, economic history, etc.) necessarily presupposes familiarity with the work of predecessors – that is, with earlier scholarly works and their contexts. This independence is demonstrated by the fact that those who study the history of historical scholarship employ autonomous methods, distinct sources, and specific lines of inquiry. Consequently, this is not a descriptive branch of the discipline but a fully normative one: its task is to uncover and understand the paradigms, intellectual backgrounds, and motivational foundations of earlier historians, grounded in a prior theoretical framework that maintains objective value-neutrality.<sup>4</sup>

The task of those who study the history of historical scholarship therefore cannot be limited to praising or condemning historians of the past, to lauding or criticising their published works, to classifying them according to their supposed or actual intellectual orientations, or to merely identifying intellectual movements and particular senses of scholarly vocation. The goal is clearly the creation of a new professional and intellectual product – one that expands the body of knowledge inherited from predecessors and, in turn, passed on to future generations.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding certain periods of historical scholarship,<sup>6</sup> there may exist sharply divergent yet simultaneously valid positions, often divided among different groups. As is well known, politics shapes the present and the future (while the politics of memory also seeks to shape the past),<sup>7</sup> whereas history

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller understanding of the concept, the following works from both international and Hungarian scholarship are recommended: Breisach, Ernst: *Historiográfia*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2004.; Carr, Edward Hallett: *Mi a történelem?* Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2005.; Barnes, Harry Elmer: *A history of historical writing*. New York, Dover Publications, 1963.; Bentley, Michael: *Modern Historiography. An Introduction*. London – New York, Routledge, 1999.; *Writing History. Theory and Practice*. Ed. Berger, Stefan – Feldner, Heiko – Passmore, Kevin. London, Arnold, 2003.; Bloch, Marc: *A történelem mestersége. Történetelméleti írások*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 1996.; Lambert, Peter – Schofield, Philipp: *Making History. An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*. London, Routledge, 2004.; *Történetelmélet I-II*. Ed. Gyurgyák, János – Kisantal, Tamás. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Erős, Vilmos: *Modern historiográfia. Az újkori történetírás egy története*. Budapest, Ráció Kiadó, 2015, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Baráth, Katalin: *A történetírás terhe. A magyar historiográfia rendhagyó története*. Budapest, Kijárat Kiadó, 2021, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Erős, Vilmos: ‘Mit jelent a történetírás-történet és miért ilyent?’ *Aetas*, 2000/4, 145–146.

<sup>5</sup> Gerő, András: *Szétszakított múlt*. Budapest, Habsburg Történeti Intézet, 2012, 173.

<sup>6</sup> Noiriél, Gérard: *A történetírás „válsága”. Elméletek, irányzatok és viták a történelemről a tudománnyá válásától napjainkig*. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2001, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Agárdi, Péter: *Nemzeti értékviták és kultúraelfogások 1847–2014*. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2014, 11.

concerns the unalterable past<sup>8</sup> and constitutes historians' field of inquiry. Yet the connection between the two is close, for the present and future can be shaped only through an understanding (or misinterpretation)<sup>9</sup> of the past.<sup>10</sup> Unlike philosophy, historical scholarship is a discipline that gradually becomes outdated.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, impartiality and a critical attitude are the minimum requirements, and historians must accompany these with what might be called a minimally subjective objectivity throughout their work.<sup>12</sup>

In recent times, the postmodern perspective has maintained that the question of whether the past can truly be known must be approached with scepticism. Typically, instead of striving for completeness or a holistic view, it emphasises particularity. Its influence within the discipline of history is felt most strongly in the historiographical mode of thought – that is, in the very ways in which the practice of historical scholarship is carried out.<sup>13</sup>

## A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON COMMUNIST HISTORICAL THOUGHT AFTER 1948

The communist takeover in Hungary took place gradually, during the period between 1945 and 1948. After the Second World War, the country – falling within the Soviet sphere of influence and under occupation – saw the Hungarian Communist Party build up its power with Moscow's backing. Under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, the communists 'salami-sliced' the other parties, dismantling them step by step, while maintaining control over the police and the state administration throughout. In 1948, they forced a merger with the Social Democrats, thereby creating the Hungarian Working People's Party. The following year, the multi-party system was definitively abolished, and under the new constitution, a so-called 'people's democracy' was established – in reality, a one-party communist state.

It must be treated as an established fact in the scholarly literature that communist ideology and the Hungarian Marxist conception of history became dominant after 1948,

under the leadership and intellectual influence of József Révai. This took place in tandem with the seizure of political power. As Minister of Popular Education, Révai regarded literature as the most decisive force among the arts and sciences that shape society.<sup>14</sup> In Hungary, however, following the Soviet model and through the efforts of the domestic communist intelligentsia, it was history – and thus the discipline of historical scholarship – that by the 1950s had become the ideological cornerstone.<sup>15</sup>

The communist movement of the interwar period faced numerous ideological challenges concerning Hungary's past, present, and future.<sup>16</sup> Because of the widespread rejection of Ervin Szabó's extremely class-struggle-oriented,<sup>17</sup> internationalist outlook, József Révai recognised in the 1930s that the communist view of history required revision.<sup>18</sup> During his years in exile, he linked the idea of social progress with the aspiration for Hungarian national independence.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that, up until the change of regime, the class character of Hungary's struggles for independence could not even be discussed.<sup>20</sup> The adoption

<sup>8</sup> Glatz, Ferenc: *Történetírás – korszakváltásban. Tanulmányok*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 1990, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Popper, Karl R.: *The Poverty of Historicism*. New York, Routledge, 1957.

<sup>10</sup> Glatz, Ferenc: *Történetírás és politika. Szekfű, Steier, Thim és Miskolczy németzetről és államról*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric. *On History*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Noiriel *op. cit.* 2001, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: *Posztmodern kánon*. Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Standeisky, Éva: Ideológia és kultúráirányítás 1945 és 1989 között. In: *A szovjet típusú rendszer időszakának vitatott kérdései*. Szerk. Rainer M., János. Pécs, Kronosz Kiadó, 2022, 143–149.

<sup>15</sup> Fischer, Holger: Történetírás a szocialista Magyarországon – periodizációs kísérlet külső szemszögből. In: *Tudomány és ideológia között. Tanulmányok az 1945 utáni magyar történetírásról*. Szerk. Erős Vilmos – Takács Ádám. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2012, 10–21.

<sup>16</sup> Agárdi *op. cit.* 2014, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ervin Szabó (1877–1918): lawyer, journalist, librarian and library director, social scientist, socialist ideologue, and one of the founders of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, which was later named after him. In his view, individual freedom and social justice could be achieved only through social progress; that is, by radically transforming the existing order and dismantling oppressive power structures.

<sup>18</sup> For Révai József's conception of Hungarian history, see: Lackó, Miklós. 'Révai József a magyar történelemről.' In: Lackó: *Sziget és külvilág. Válogatott tanulmányok*. Budapest, MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1996, 203–259.

<sup>19</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: *Relatív történelem*. Budapest, Typotex, 2007, 116.

<sup>20</sup> Standeisky, Éva: *Gúzsba kötve. A kulturális elit és a hatalom*. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, 2005, 135.

of a class-struggle-based *kuruc* (insurgent, anti-Habsburg) interpretation of history was thus intended to offset the perception of communism as 'un-Hungarian'.<sup>21</sup> By the 1950s, this tradition of national independence had become the principal guiding line in the communist conception of history.<sup>22</sup>

A defining ideological feature of this historical outlook was its impersonality:<sup>23</sup> the struggle of the great (working) masses, or in communist terminology, the *class struggle*, against the oppressive ruling classes. In contemporary interpretation, Hungarian history was read as a continuous battle between the 'treacherous lord' and the 'patriotic worker and peasant'.<sup>24</sup> From this ideological foundation arose an emphasis that greatly supported research into social and economic history,<sup>25</sup> even though its real purpose was merely to illustrate oppression as interpreted through Marxist conceptions of the past.<sup>26</sup> The study of the so-called subjugated social classes thus became a central

theme, framed within the Marxist conceptual structure of 'base and superstructure'.<sup>27</sup> Behind this lay the communist notion of a persistent – yet at the same time highly ambivalent – egalitarian struggle. Social problems of the past were discussed primarily within an economic-historical context, since, according to the theory of social formations, the masses were situated within the superstructure.<sup>28</sup>

The directions promoted by propaganda sought to avoid rhetorical expressions unfamiliar to the general public and instead adopted a traditional,<sup>29</sup> broadly recognisable *folkish* style of language.<sup>30</sup> In the sharp critiques of the 1960s, this approach came to be described as a 'romantically *kuruc*-like'<sup>31</sup> or 'folklorising' outlook.<sup>32</sup>

The canonisation of the 'popular front' communist view of history – by merging the ideal of national independence with the principle of class struggle – sought to appeal to the deeper roots of Hungarian

society.<sup>33</sup> In this conception, Hungarian history could be described as a continuous struggle for independence against German (i.e. Habsburg) domination, extending from the Middle Ages up to the present of the period in question. Although this approach was regarded as lying on the borderline of historical scholarship, any discussion of contemporary issues invariably concluded with paeans to Stalin and the Soviet Union – whose glory, it was claimed, transcended the bounds of human reason.<sup>34</sup> Within the dual typology of *kuruc* and *labanc* (terms for anti- and pro-Habsburg forces, respectively), a framework could be articulated to express the dichotomy between independence and imperial subservience.<sup>35</sup> This interpretation was propagated by József Révai, Aladár Mód, and Erzsébet Andics.<sup>36</sup>

Another element of this conceptual framework – one that grew stronger from the 1960s onward – was the so-called 'divergence thesis'. According to this view,

<sup>21</sup> Gyarmati, György: *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956*. Budapest, Rubicon Intézet, 2021, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Bence, György: Átmenet és átmentés a humán tudományban. *BUKSZ*, 1992/ősz, 353.

<sup>23</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: *Történelemszűzok*. Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2002, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Pritz, Pál: *Történelem és nemzet*. Budapest, Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont – Magyar Történelmi Társulat – Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság, 2023, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ormos, Mária: *Van-e történelem?* Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2012, 126.

<sup>26</sup> Benda, Kálmán: Nemzeti öntudat és történetírás. *Hitel*, 1988/1, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Szijártó, M. István: *A történelem diskurzusa. Bevezetés a 20. századi történetírás történetébe és elméletébe*. Budapest, Ráció Kiadó, 2021, 218.

<sup>28</sup> Csíki, Tamás – Halmos, Károly – Tóth, Árpád: 'A magyar társadalomtörténet-írás története a kezdetektől napjainkig'. In: Bódy, Zsombor – Ö. Kovács, József (ed.): *Bevezetés a társadalomtörténetbe*. Ed. Bódy, Zsombor – Ö. Kovács, József. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2003, 225.

<sup>29</sup> Rainer, M. János: *Bevezetés a kádárizmusba*. Budapest, 1956-os Intézet – L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2011, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Majtényi, György: *A tudomány lajtorjája. „Társadalmi mobilitás” és „új értelmiség” Magyarországon a II. világháború után*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó – Magyar Országos Levéltár, 2005, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Kosáry, Domokos: 'Múltunkról – öncsonkítás nélkül. Kosáry Domokossal beszélget Hanák Gábor'. In: Kosáry, Domokos: *A történelem veszedelmei. Írások Európáról és Magyarországról*. Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1987, 526.

<sup>32</sup> Pamlényi, Ervin: *Pályák és irányok. Historiográfiai és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Romsics, Gergely – Zahorán, Csaba: 'Útkereső történészek. Megjegyzések egy lezáratlan eszmecsere margójára'. *Történelmi Szemle*, 2019/4, 780.

<sup>34</sup> Ständeisky: *op. cit.* 2005, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: 'Kánon, ellenkánon és politikai megfelelés'. In: Dénes Iván Zoltán (ed.): *A magyar történetírás kánonjai*. Ed. Dénes, Iván Zoltán. Budapest, Ráció Kiadó, 2015, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: 'A történetírás újragondolása'. *Történelmi Szemle*, 2006/3–4, 265.

intended to reinforce pro-Soviet sentiment, Hungarian history was interpreted as part of an Eastern European developmental pattern distinct from that of Western Europe. In the 1950s, it became a foundational tenet that among the lower social strata there had existed an institution known as the 'second serfdom', a notion that conveniently aligned with contemporary political expectations.<sup>37</sup>

It is worth returning to the idea that history has often served – and continues to serve – an ideological – and thus in turn political – purpose. As a tool of politics, history occupies a prominent place in the formation of identity.<sup>38</sup> In accordance with the ideological expectations of the period,<sup>39</sup> historians were expected to follow and comment on current events<sup>40</sup> and, in some cases taken to absurdity, to incorporate retrospective allusions to them within their own works.<sup>41</sup>

The scholarly literature contains extensive critical commentary on the political ideology of the 1950s. For understandable reasons, historians of the Kádár era – including those who had been active, even productive, during the period in question – also took part in this critique.<sup>42</sup> The 'simplified, primitive vulgar Marxism'<sup>43</sup> and the freedom-fighter stance of a history shaped around national traditions had, in a sense, become ingrained in society.<sup>44</sup> Révai's ideological turn produced ambivalent results from the standpoint of communist interpretation. Expressions found in the literature, such as 'feather-hat Marxism' (*darutollas marxizmus*),<sup>45</sup> or the dogmatic 'national communist'<sup>46</sup> outlook that appeared in certain journals (which György Litván described as apologetic and self-congratulatory),<sup>47</sup> reflect an ideological tendency that undeniably served to embed the communist system of ideas within Hungarian conditions, yet it did so while completely disregarding the society's own self-interpretation. For the party

leadership, the propagation of a national independence narrative functioned merely as a political slogan, though it also became a guiding thread within historical scholarship. Paradoxically, however, before 1956 they failed to recognise that the very patriotic, defensive traditions they were promoting could acquire an anti-Soviet edge, and help lay the groundwork for revolution.<sup>48</sup>

### A GENERAL HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW OF HUNGARIAN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP BETWEEN 1948 AND 1953

The Sovietisation – or, to use Ignác Romsics's term, *gleichschaltung*<sup>49</sup> – of Hungarian historical scholarship has been described in several of Romsics's major works. In 2008, he published a volume of selected studies titled *Történelem, történetírás, hagyomány* (History, Historiography, Tradition), in which he surveyed the historiography of the period.<sup>50</sup> Yet the most crucial work for this topic – and one which

<sup>37</sup> Erős, Vilmos: 'A „harmadik út” gondolata az 1945 utáni magyar agrártörténet-írásban'. *Valóság*, 2024/8, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Romsics, Ignác: 'Identitáspolitikai és történelem'. In: Romsics, Ignác: *Történelem, történetírás, hagyomány. Tanulmányok és cikkek, 2002–2008*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2008. 267.

<sup>39</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: 'Mi fán terem a marxista történetírás?' *Századok*, 2021/6, 1312–1313.

<sup>40</sup> Szabó, Miklós: *A jó kommunista szilárdan együtt ingadozik a Párttal. Előadások a kommunista pártok történetéről és a fekete-piros-fehérvörös színre festett sztálinizmusról*. Szeged, Szegedi Egyetemi Kiadó, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Glatz: *op. cit.* 1990, 56.

<sup>42</sup> E. Fehér, Pál: 'A magyar történettudomány gondjai. Beszélgetés Andics Erzsébettel'. *Kritika*, 1972/5, 14–15.; Molnár, Erik: 'A magyar történetírás a felszabadulás óta; eredményei, hiányosságai és legsürgősebb feladatai'. *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1952/1, 53–65.; Pach, Zsigmond Pál: 'A nacionalizmus elleni harc történettudományunkban'. *Történelmi Szemle*, 1964/2, 303–329.

<sup>43</sup> Gunst, Péter: *A magyar történetírás története*. Debrecen, Csokonai Kiadó, 1995, 190.

<sup>44</sup> Romsics, Ignác: *Hérodotosztól Harariig. Nyugat történeti gondolkodás korszakai, irányzatai és klasszikusai*. Budapest, Helikon Kiadó, 2024, 430.

<sup>45</sup> Litván, György: *Sorstársak és kortársak*. Budapest, Noran, 2008, 191.

<sup>46</sup> Primarily following the Marxist philosopher and academic József Szigeti. See: Szigeti, József. 'A nemzeti kommunizmus öskeresése', *Élet és Irodalom*, 1958/9, 1–2.

<sup>47</sup> Litván, György: 'Történetírásunk és jelenkorunk'. In: *Hatalom és társadalom a XX. századi magyar történelemben*. Ed. Valuch, Tibor. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó – 1956-os Intézet, 1995. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Dinnyei, Béla: 'A nemzeti ideológia mint „hamis tudat”. Molnár Erik nemzet- és függetlenségi hagyomány-értelmezése'. In: *A bűnbaktól a realista lényeglátóig. A magyar politikai és tudományos diskurzusok Kossuth-képei 1849–2002*. Ed. Dénes, Iván Zoltán. Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó, 2004. 98–99.

<sup>49</sup> Romsics, Ignác: *Clio bűvöletében. Magyar történetírás a 19–20. században – nemzetközi kitekintéssel*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2011, 356.

<sup>50</sup> Romsics, Ignác: 'Magyar történetírás a 20. Században'. In: Romsics Ignác: *Történelem, történetírás, hagyomány. Tanulmányok és cikkek, 2002–2008*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2008. 177–194.

still forms the bedrock of Hungarian historiographical research to this day – is his 2011 monograph *Clio bűvöletében* (Under Clio's Spell).<sup>51</sup> As its subtitle indicates, the book offers an overview of the history of Hungarian historical writing and scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Alongside an examination of the major institutional transformations of the era (such as those of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Hungarian Historical Society, the Institute of History, the Institute of the History of the Hungarian Workers' Movement,<sup>52</sup> university and archival institutions, etc.),<sup>53</sup> Romsics's work also focuses on introducing the key historians who defined the period, as well as the 'historical works' that were either published or canonised during those years. In the same year, he delivered his inaugural lecture to the Academy, which was published in 2014 under the title *The Gleichschaltung of Hungarian Historiography, 1945–1949*.<sup>54</sup>

Among general historiographical works, Péter Gunst's independent

monograph deserves particular mention, as it examines the entire history of Hungarian historical writing.<sup>55</sup> Gunst devotes a separate chapter to the post-1945 period, which had previously appeared as a standalone study.<sup>56</sup> His work is especially significant for its attention to the transformations within the subfields of the discipline – most notably social history, economic history, and the history of popular culture and folk life.

In the field of intellectual history and the interpretation of the past, Iván Zoltán Dénes stands out as another major scholar to have produced a comprehensive monograph on Hungarian historiography. In addition to several studies<sup>57</sup> and a monograph<sup>58</sup> of his own, he also edited the volume *A magyar történetírás kánonjai* (The Canons of Hungarian Historiography), which includes contributions by several authors discussing the early Marxist period of Hungarian historical scholarship.<sup>59</sup>

From the 1980s onward, Ferenc Glatz devoted several decades to studying the

defining features of this broad topic. His 1988 study<sup>60</sup> on the history of Hungarian historiography examined the effects of political changes in Hungary (and, more broadly, internationally), including the Stalinising tendencies that shaped scholarly activity in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>61</sup>

In the field of Hungarian historical thought, historical outlook, and historiographical principles, the most substantial single work is that written by Gábor Gyáni.<sup>62</sup> His monographic study *Történezdiskurzusok* (Historians' Discourses) offers a detailed analysis of the seizure of power within the discipline, primarily through the lens of the canon–anti-canon dichotomy.<sup>63</sup> In a more recent study providing a comprehensive analysis of Hungarian Marxist historiography, Gyáni also interprets the period of transition and the events that followed.<sup>64</sup>

From the perspective of this topic, Vilmos Erős is another scholar engaged in comprehensive historiographical research. In a series of studies, he

<sup>51</sup> Romsics: *op. cit.* 2011, 347–480. For a more general historical overview, see: Romsics, Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2010. 320–376.

<sup>52</sup> For the history of the institution, see: B. Kádár, Zsuzsanna: *Állam-párt-történetírás*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Romsics, Ignác: 'A magyar történetírás intézményrendszere és fórumai'. *Aetas*, 2010/4, 7–14.

<sup>54</sup> Romsics, Ignác: *A magyar történetírás gleichschaltolása, 1945–1949*. Budapest, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Gunst: *op. cit.* 1995.

<sup>56</sup> Gunst, Péter: Történetírásunk 1945 után. *Debreceni Szemle*, 1993/2, 257–279.

<sup>57</sup> Dénes, Iván Zoltán: 'A nagymagyar-kismagyar politika fogalma'. *Magyar történetírók portréi* (20. század). *Korunk*, 2024/3, 39–51.

<sup>58</sup> Dénes: *op. cit.* 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Dénes: *op. cit.* 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Glatz, Ferenc: 'Történetírásunk és az utóbbi negyven esztendő'. In: Glatz, Ferenc: *Nemzeti kultúra – kulturált nemzet, 1867–1987*. Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 1988, 402–423. The study was republished in a revised form in 2011. See: Glatz, Ferenc: 'Történetírás Magyarországon, 1949–1990'. *Történelmi Szemle*, 2011/3, 315–334.

<sup>61</sup> Glatz, Ferenc: 'Jelenkortörténet és jelentörténet'. In: *Hatalom és társadalom a XX. századi magyar történelemben*. Ed. Valuch, Tibor. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó – 1956-os Intézet, 1995, 17–27.

<sup>62</sup> Gyáni: *op. cit.* 2007; Gyáni: *op. cit.* 2018; Gyáni: *A történeti tudás*. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Gyáni: *op. cit.* 2002; cf. Assmann, Aleida – Assmann, Jan: 'Kánon és cenzúra'. In: *Irodalmi kánon és kanonizáció*. Ed. Rohonyi, Zoltán. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó – Láthatatlan Kollégium, 2001, 87–107.; Assmann, Jan: *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Budapest, Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Gyáni: *op. cit.* 2021, 1311–1332.

has examined the history of Hungarian historical writing<sup>65</sup> and historiography<sup>66</sup> in the post-1945 era. Together with Ádám Takács, he co-edited a volume of studies approaching this period from various perspectives,<sup>67</sup> and is also the author of specialised works dealing with *népiségtörténet* – the historiographical study of popular culture and folk life.<sup>68</sup>

In the field of general historiographical studies, significant scholarly works have also appeared in American, British, and German literature. Already in the period under discussion, Steven Borsody wrote about the Sovietisation of the discipline with scholarly rigour in the *Journal of Modern History*.<sup>69</sup> The German historian Holger Fischer, in his Munich-published monograph, examined the relationship between Hungarian politics and historical scholarship from 1918 to 1956<sup>70</sup> – a study later ‘continued’ by Gerhard Seewann, who extended the analysis up to the 1980s.<sup>71</sup> Fischer also

produced a study – translated into Hungarian – on the periodisation of historical scholarship after 1945.<sup>72</sup> The German historian of Hungarian origin Árpád von Klimó wrote a brief English-language study on the Sovietisation of the historical discipline.<sup>73</sup> The most comprehensive non-Hungarian historiographical work, however, was published by another Hungarian-born scholar, the American historian Steven Béla Várdy, under the title *Modern Hungarian Historiography* in 1976.<sup>74</sup>

#### THE INTELLIGENTSIA DURING THE INTRODUCTION OF THE ONE-PARTY SYSTEM AND THE FORMATION OF MARXIST SCIENCE POLICY

In recent decades, substantial scholarly progress<sup>75</sup> has been made in studying the early policies toward science, intellectual life, and culture under the communist one-party system, which replaced the brief period of pluralist politics following the Second World

War. It is a widely accepted historical fact in the literature that from the spring of 1945 onward – and with even greater emphasis during the Rákosi era – efforts were made to create a new type of intelligentsia, while culture and science were demoted to servants of power and of an ideology<sup>76</sup> that shifted pragmatically with political exigencies.<sup>77</sup>

The communist regime set itself sharply in opposition to the former Hungarian leadership and ruling classes.<sup>78</sup> On this basis, members of the intelligentsia branded as ‘old’, ‘bourgeois’, or, in extreme cases, ‘fascist’, were pushed out<sup>79</sup> (a period marked by dismissals, internments, and forced relocations).<sup>80</sup> The replenishment of cadres proceeded relatively slowly in the late 1940s,<sup>81</sup> and as a result, the bureaucratic stratum of the time often overlapped with the key figures of the country’s scientific and cultural life.<sup>82</sup> The principal criterion for selection was working-class

<sup>65</sup> Erős: *op. cit.* 2013, 48–74.

<sup>66</sup> Erős: *op. cit.* 2012, 151–166.

<sup>67</sup> Erős – Takács: *op. cit.* 2012.

<sup>68</sup> *A harmadik út felé. Szabó István történész cikkekben és dokumentumokban.* Ed. Erős, Vilmos. Budapest, Lucidus Kiadó, 2003.; Erős, Vilmos: *A szellemtörténetől a népiségtörténetig. Tanulmányok a két világháború közötti magyar történetírásról.* Debrecen, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Borsody, Steven: *Modern Hungarian Historiography. Journal of Modern History*, 1952/4, 398–405.

<sup>70</sup> Fischer, Holger: *Politik und Geschichtswissenschaft in Ungarn. Die ungarische Geschichte von 1918 bis zur Gegenwart in der Historiographie seit 1956.* München, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1982.

<sup>71</sup> Seewann, Gerhard: *Geschichtswissenschaft und Politik in Ungarn 1950–1980. Die Historiographie zu Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Südost-Forschungen*, 1982, 261–323.

<sup>72</sup> Fischer: *op. cit.* 2012, 10–21.

<sup>73</sup> Klimó, Árpád von: *The Sovietization of Hungarian Historiography. Failures and Modification in the early 1950s.* In: *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe. New Perspectives on the Postwar Period.* Ed. Apor, Balázs – Apor, Péter – Rees, Arfon E. Washington DC, New Academia Pub, 2008, 237–248.

<sup>74</sup> Vardy, Steven Bela: *Modern Hungarian Historiography.* East European Quarterly, Boulder, 1976.

<sup>75</sup> Without attempting to be exhaustive, these include: Standeisky: *op. cit.* 2005; Bíró et al. *op. cit.* 2016.; Standeisky Éva: ‘A szellemi elit és a politika változása a második világháborút követő években’. In: *Értelmiségi válaszutak 1945 után. Egy akadémiai ülésről előadásai.* Ed. Papp, Gábor. Budapest, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 2017, 9–29.

<sup>76</sup> Papp, István: *A magyar kommunisták 1918–1989.* Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2024, 189.

<sup>77</sup> Szigeti, József. *Intellektuális önéletrajzom. A szellemi ébredéstől társadalmi hivatásra ébredésemig, 1921–1948.* Budapest, Eötvös József Könyvkiadó, 2000, 349.

<sup>78</sup> Standeisky, Éva: ‘A kommunista polgárelenesség’. *Budapest Negyed*, 1995/2, 209–226.

<sup>79</sup> Gyáni, Gábor: ‘Hajnal István történetírása – új megvilágításban’. *Korall*, 2024/95, 135.

<sup>80</sup> Romsics: *op. cit.* 2010, 271–375.; Gyarmati: *op. cit.* 2021, 221–233.

<sup>81</sup> Gyarmati, György: ‘Káderpolitika a Rákosi-korszak tanácsrendszerében, 1950–1953’. *Magyar Tudomány*, 1998/10, 1189.

<sup>82</sup> Standeisky, Éva: ‘A hatalom kapui. Értelmiségiek közszerepben’. In: *Hatalmi diskurzusok. A hatalom reprezentációi a tudományokban és a művészetekben.* Eds. Bíró Csilla – Visy Beatrix. Budapest, Bibliotheca Nationalis Hungariae – Gondolat Kiadó, 2016, 171–179.

origin; however, the shortage of qualified professionals in the 1950s shifted the regime's expectations toward an emphasis on party loyalty and ideological reliability.<sup>83</sup>

In leadership positions, as well as in the fields of science and culture, the model for change was drawn from the Soviet Union of the 1930s. A characteristic example of this forced institutional transformation<sup>84</sup> was the replacement of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education with the newly established Ministry of Popular Education. At its head stood József Révai, who thereby became the principal overseer of intellectual life.<sup>85</sup> Under his direction, cultural and scientific policy became extremely centralised, rigidly schematic,<sup>86</sup> and wholly ideologised. Unlike the later Kádár-era tripartite model of cultural control developed by György Aczél, Révai and his circle in the early 1950s implemented a new policy of value creation that deliberately rejected traditional cultural values and instead promoted previously marginalised 'progressive' and working-class traditions.<sup>87</sup> The intellectual's freedom of thought and capacity for independent expression stood in sharp opposition to a regime that demanded total adherence to party directives. Paradoxically, the regime itself did not conceal

the fact that culture and science were to be considered domains of ideology. From this premise, the intellectuals close to power can be divided into two groups according to their mindset and attitude. One group consisted of those who, in the realm of ideas, followed the new system and its theoretical manifestations. The other, markedly different group comprised those who also belonged to the power structure but served it pragmatically, as instruments of political intent;<sup>88</sup> many of them had developed this 'instinct' according to the Soviet model of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>89</sup>

Mark Lilla's twofold categorisation<sup>90</sup> is considerably nuanced – and at the same time broadened – by Hungarian scholarship, yet it vividly highlights the conditions of intellectual life in the humanities during the 1950s. The regime's objective was not merely to replicate the state of affairs in the Soviet Union, but to internalise and comprehend the path that led to it.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Hobsbawm: *op. cit.* 2006, 145.

<sup>84</sup> Rainer, M.: *op. cit.* 2011, 26–27.

<sup>85</sup> Standeisky: *op. cit.* 2022, 148.

<sup>86</sup> The schematisation that took place in the fields of culture and science was first examined in the Western scholarly literature, with specific focus on the Hungarian context, by Holger Fischer. Fischer: *op. cit.* 1982, 70–72.

<sup>87</sup> Standeisky, Éva: 'Kultúra és politika Magyarországon (1945–1956)'. In: *Társadalom és kultúra Magyarországon a 19–20. században*. Ed. Vonyó József. Pécs, Pro Pannonia Kiadói Alapítvány – Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 2003, 123.

<sup>88</sup> Glatz: *op. cit.* 2011, 316–317.

<sup>89</sup> Standeisky: *op. cit.* 2005, 71.

<sup>90</sup> Lilla, Mark: *A zaboláltlan értelem. Értelmiségiek a politikában*. Budapest, Európa, 2005. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Földes, György: 'A jövőtől a jelen felé. A pártoktatási kézikönyvek szocializmusképe, 1945–1953'. In: Földes, György: *Ívek és töréspontok. Gazdaság, politika, ideológia 1945 után. Tanulmányok*. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2018, 243.

Máté Németh

## Sándor Csoóri and the Hungarian Writers' Union



### THE BIRTH AND OPERATION OF THE WRITERS' UNION

There were few events during the 1970s and 1980s that were critical of the hardships imposed by the Kádár regime in which Sándor Csoóri did not take part. Charta '77, the Bibó Memorial Book, the founding of the Bethlen Gábor Foundation, the Monor Meeting, his interventions at the forums of the Writers' Union, various writers' gatherings – the list could be extended almost indefinitely. The Kossuth Prize-winning poet and essayist, alongside his sociographical writings of the 1960s, consistently kept Hungary's social problems in the public eye, including the alarming state of the nation's demography and the desperate circumstances of Hungarian communities beyond the borders. He was rightly regarded as one of the leading figures of the so-called *népi* (populist or folk-national) camp.

Although the events of 1956 brought about a paradigm shift in the exercise of power, the foundations of the system (the party-state, the supervisory role of state security, the Soviet occupation, and so on) remained

unchanged. It was within this milieu that critical voices had to find whatever opportunities they could to openly articulate the problems of the dictatorial regime – or, at the very least, to discuss them within narrower circles. As the decades progressed, the Writers' Union came to play an increasingly prominent role in this regard. From the 1970s onwards, one could sense ever more clearly that its operation was no longer characterized by party-driven micromanagement, but that it served instead as a forum in which certain writers – Sándor Csoóri among them – could take a critical position. It is for good reason that Gy. Csaba Kiss emphasizes the significance of the processes unfolding here for the later transition to democracy, while at the same time lamenting the relative neglect of the organization in the scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup>

The Hungarian Writers' Union was founded in the spring of 1945 with the declared aim of securing official recognition for the status of writers.<sup>2</sup> In reality, however, the true purpose behind its creation became unmistakably clear no later than the Writers' Congress of 1946. György Lukács's<sup>3</sup> address (The Unity of Hungarian Literature and Its Tasks) and the discussions that followed made it evident that the Communist Party's objective was to draw writers – especially the '*népi*' writers – towards the party and to forge an alliance with them. Through this strategy, by winning over the centrist and left-leaning elements of that otherwise heterogeneous group, the party hoped to secure the potential support of the poor peasantry and sections of the rural intelligentsia.<sup>4</sup> For several years, however, the Writers' Union had little real significance, since the Hungarian Communist Party focused primarily on eliminating its political opponents. Once that process had been

<sup>1</sup> *A másik Magyarország hangja. Dokumentumok az Írószövetség 1986-os közgyűléséről.* Compiled by: Kiss, Gy. Csaba and Szilcz, Eszter. Budapest: Antológia Kiadó, 2016, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Vasy, Géza: *A Magyar Írószövetség rövid története.* [https://www.iroszovetseg.hu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MI\\_tortenete\\_vegl.pdf](https://www.iroszovetseg.hu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MI_tortenete_vegl.pdf) (Accessed: 30 October 2025.)

<sup>3</sup> György Lukács (1885–1971), Hungarian philosopher and communist politician, served as a people's commissar during the Hungarian Soviet Republic and was also a member of Imre Nagy's second government.

<sup>4</sup> Standeisky, Éva: *Gúzsba kötve. A kulturális elit és a hatalom. Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution – Historical Archives of the State Security Services, 2005, p. 165.*

successfully completed, József Révai,<sup>5</sup> the party's chief cultural ideologue, deemed it timely to restructure literary life. A key part of this was the membership review<sup>6</sup> within the Writers' Union – a process that affected mainly bourgeois writers. The result of this was that two-thirds of the membership also belonged to the Communist organization, by then operating under the name Hungarian Working People's Party (MDP).<sup>7</sup> Until 1953 the Writers' Union functioned virtually as an arm of the MDP, and the task of writers was to provide ideological justification for the party line. Literary autonomy was, in effect, extinguished; in return, those who complied with the prescribed formula enjoyed recognition from the highest circles. In the final years of the Rákosi era, between 1951 and 1953, the organization was headed by József Darvas<sup>8</sup> – a 'népi' writer who also held several ministerial posts in rapid succession.

The political changes that began with Stalin's death in 1953 soon also made themselves felt among writers and within the Writers' Union. Increasingly forthright criticism of the political leadership appeared in the pages of various literary journals. Even though Imre Nagy was removed from the

premiership on Moscow's orders in 1955, and later expelled from the party, the growing boldness of the writers could no longer be checked. A crucial milestone in breaking free from the straitjacket of party directives was the Union's general assembly of September 1956, where demands for autonomy and genuine freedom of publication were openly voiced.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the Union's journal, *Irodalmi Újság*, was able to publish an ever larger number of sharply critical pieces. In the months that followed, up until the end of December, the Writers' Union effectively became one of the intellectual centres of the Hungarian resistance, supporting Imre Nagy and his short-lived government. On 1 November the Union issued a statement declaring that Hungarian writers had taken part in preparing the revolution and felt it their duty to safeguard its moral integrity. They urged that crimes committed against the people be punished – not by mobs in the streets, but in Hungarian courts of law.<sup>10</sup> Two leading figures of the *népi* literary movement, Gyula Illyés and László Németh, also spoke out: Illyés with his famous *One Sentence on Tyranny*, and Németh with *A Rising Nation*, in which he wrote: '*The past week has been an overwhelming experience for*

*me, because these few days have shown – not only to me, but to the whole world – how greatly the Hungarian nation has risen in moral stature.*'<sup>11</sup> Alongside them, the revolutionary issue of *Irodalmi Újság* featured contributions by Lajos Kassák, Milán Füst, Tibor Déry, and Lőrinc Szabó, all 'greeting' the events as they unfolded. It is worth quoting From Tibor Déry's *My Friends*: 'We thought we were going to build socialism, and instead they walled us in behind prison walls made of blood and lies.'<sup>12</sup> The Writers' Union's support for the revolution sealed its subsequent fate. Once János Kádár and his circle had suppressed the workers' councils, the authorities turned against the organization and the writers themselves. In January 1957, the Ministry of the Interior suspended the operation of the Hungarian Writers' Union, and in April it dissolved the organization altogether on the pretext of an 'attack against the social order of the Hungarian People's Republic'.<sup>13</sup>

In September 1959 the Writers' Union was once again permitted to resume its work at the Fészek Club – this time under close Kádár-era party control. The old-new president, József Darvas, publicly pledged loyalty to the Kádár system. The Union's secretary general became

<sup>5</sup> József Révai (1898–1959) was a Hungarian communist politician and writer, and one of the leading cultural policymakers and ideologues of the Rákosi era.

<sup>6</sup> They also dissolved the independent literary journals; of these, *Válasz* managed to survive the longest, publishing its final issue in 1949. The literary periodicals were brought under the control of the Party.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 168.

<sup>8</sup> József Darvas (1912–1973) was a Hungarian writer associated with the *népi írók* (Populist Writers) movement, and later a politician. He was initially a member of the National Peasant Party, and subsequently joined the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

<sup>10</sup> Ständeisky, Éva: *Az írók és a hatalom 1956-1963*. Budapest, Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, 1996, 79-80.

<sup>11</sup> Németh, László: *Emelkedő nemzet. Irodalmi Újság*, 1956/43. 1. <https://mek.oszk.hu/01000/01013/01013.htm#7> (Accessed: 30 October 2025.)

<sup>12</sup> Ständeisky *op. cit.* 1996, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Vasy *op. cit.* *A Magyar Írószövetség rövid története*.

Imre Dobozy,<sup>14</sup> who, following Darvas's death, assumed the leadership of the organization from 1973 onwards. Géza Vasy,<sup>15</sup> literary historian and a former president of the Writers' Union, divides the post-1959 history of the organization into two major periods, identifying the 1981 general assembly as the dividing line. Up to that point four assemblies were held (1962, 1965, 1970, 1976), of which the 1970 meeting is particularly worth noting. That year, on 25–26 May, the Union held a general assembly attended by György Aczél, the secretary of the MSZMP Central Committee. The expanded presidium was meant to be formed on the basis of a pre-prepared list of 47 names. However, during the assembly, members proposed additional candidates. Without offering any particular justification, Miklós Hubay suggested, among others, the name of Sándor Csoóri – a proposal that, according to the minutes, was met with applause.<sup>16</sup> When the 231 ballot papers were counted, Sándor Csoóri was elected to the presidium with 150 votes; Mihály Czine likewise secured a place.

### SÁNDOR CSOÓRI, THE WRITER AND POET

Sándor Csoóri was born in 1930 into a peasant family in Zámoly, Fejér County. He completed his secondary schooling at the Reformed College of Pápa, and later became a student

at Eötvös Loránd University, though illness prevented him from taking his degree. His first poems appeared in the first half of the 1950s, along with his debut volume, *Felröppen a madár* ('The Bird Takes Flight'). Regarding his experience of the events of 1956, his biographer András Görömbei writes: '*For Csoóri, the few days of the revolution became an ideal moment in the life of the Hungarian nation, when the people of the country acted as a nation, clearly expressing their desire for freedom and for a European way of life. Csoóri had to realize that he could no longer suffuse the facts with the pathos of hope for a solution close at hand.*'<sup>17</sup>

He became acquainted with the realities and vigilance of censorship as early as the late 1950s, when a poem of his (*Vért és virágot* or 'Blood and Flowers'), published in Kortárs in 1959, was flagged by the authorities. The expression 'neutral homeland' caused difficulties for the censors, who requested that he replace it with the word 'boundless'.<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1960s his attention turned toward the genre of literary sociography, though he also wrote film novellas and even an investigative short novel. Looking back on *Tudósítás a toronyból*, his sociographical work, he later remarked that he had produced it in despair, instead of poems, and regarded it as a kind of

'prosaic training exercise'.<sup>19</sup> As his talent as both poet and prose writer blossomed, earning him increasing renown as a consistent representative of folk culture, he too sought to build the 'small circles of freedom'<sup>20</sup> within the confines of the party-state, joining various friendship circles and literary groups. One such well-known community was the Great People's Hural at the end of the 1960s, which the state security services monitored with special attention. Among its members we find Sándor Csoóri, who saw himself as an heir to the intellectual legacy of the folk writers; but the group – organized chiefly around Ferenc Kiss – also established ties with Mihály Iliá, who at that time was an editor of *Tiszatáj* and from the early 1970s its editor-in-chief. The journal offered the group an opportunity to publish, and they were similarly able to make their voices heard in several other periodicals, such as *Forrás* in Kecskemét or *Alföld* in Debrecen. Although the county journals had a limited readership, they nonetheless allowed one to push the boundaries of legal publication, making it possible to address subjects that were otherwise suppressed – at least until warnings or reprisals put a stop to it.

<sup>14</sup> Imre Dobozy (1917–1982) was a Hungarian writer and journalist, and served as president of the Hungarian Writers' Union between 1975 and 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Géza Vasy was president of the Hungarian Writers' Association between 2007 and 2010.

<sup>16</sup> HU-RETÖRKIL X.5. Internal and Central Archives of the Hungarian Writers' Union, Minutes, Box 11, Unit 4. *Gyorsírói jegyzőkönyv a Magyar Írók Szövetsége 1970. május 25-26-án tartott közgyűléséről.*

<sup>17</sup> Görömbei, András: *Csoóri Sándor*. Bratislava, Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 2003, 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Forrásvidék. A nemzeti demokratikus gondolkodás a magyar folyóiratok tükrében (1956–1987)*. Lakitelek, Antológia Kiadó, 2017, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Csoóri, Sándor: *Tudósítás a toronyból*. Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1963, 211–212.

<sup>20</sup> The concept originates with István Bibó.

## THE 1970S – STRUGGLE ON SEVERAL FRONTS

'What happened at the Writers' Union's 1970 general assembly explains the changes that followed,' Gyula Fekete remarked in an interview,<sup>21</sup> noting that from that point onward the Writers' Union began putting forward its own candidates for the organization's various bodies. Under the organization's rules, the executive committee elected the secretariat, which in turn elected the chair, the general secretary, and the secretaries.<sup>22</sup> The 1970s saw lively activity within the Writers' Union: over a five-year period roughly two hundred events were organized – literary evenings, debates, book launches.<sup>23</sup> At the 1976 general assembly, the executive expanded further in line with the enlarged membership; the now 61-member body still included Sándor Csoóri. The real breakthrough, however, came only five years later, in 1981.

Throughout the 1970s, Csoóri's work exerted influence on public life on multiple fronts. His essay collections (*Utazás félálomban*, *Tenger és diólevél*) were published, and his prose and poetry were taken up by several county journals. From the late 1960s the situation of ethnic Hungarians living beyond the borders became the central focus of his thought: he aimed to bring this issue into public view and to awaken a sense of

national responsibility towards Hungarians in neighbouring countries. His 1973 essay *Utazás félálomban* (Travelling Half-Asleep) sums up his views on the matter, presenting to the reader thoughts and memories that surface during a fictional journey. His biographer, András Görömbei, writes of the work: 'He seeks to understand where his eternal sense of belatedness, his perpetual feeling of inferiority, of constant anxiety and malaise comes from. The oppressive experiences that return make it plain that this East-Central European region is Europe's step-child – a life and a history hidden away in shame. [...] He questions East-Central Europeans' myth of Western Europe and America. This essay is almost an inventory of the East-Central European state of mind – confronting the wider world with a balance of "devotion and condemnation".'<sup>24</sup> Alongside his dissatisfaction with the situation of ethnic Hungarian minorities, the essay also raises the possibility of change – achievable only through a shared determination.

Sándor Csoóri and those who thought along similar lines also 'set the state security organs in motion.' A document worth quoting verbatim is The Report on the Implementation of Ministerial Order No. 0022/1970 Regulating the Tasks of Operational Work Against Hostile Activity in the Cultural Sphere, published in 1977:

*'The activity of the enemy attacking from a nationalist political platform has been particularly lively since 1974, and is appearing with increasing force. The ties between prominent intellectual figures have become closer, and their efforts towards unity have intensified. The most significant is the circle whose leading figures are Mihály Czine, Gyula Fekete, Sándor Csoóri and Ferenc Kis(s). They possess, on a national scale, a potentially mobilizable and relatively broad base. Their shared political conception, their concern with the 'fateful questions' of the Hungarian nation, and their struggle for position are combined with systematic organizational activity. [...] Their activity is directed primarily against the Party's cultural policy, which they characterize as "un-national".'*<sup>25</sup>

The end of the decade was no quieter for Csoóri. In 1979 he was among those who, in connection with Charter '77,<sup>26</sup> signed a letter addressed to the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic, demanding the release of those imprisoned in Czechoslovakia. He also served on the editorial committee of the Bibó Memorial Book,<sup>27</sup> completed in 1980, which could circulate only as samizdat.

The greatest storm was caused by the essay he wished to publish on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, *Egy nomád értelmiségi* (A Nomadic Intellectual),<sup>28</sup> written in 1978. It

<sup>21</sup> Stefka, István: *Rendszerváltók. Mi történt itt?* Budapest, Kairosz Kiadó, 2006. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Vasy *op. cit.* *A Magyar Írószövetség rövid története.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Görömbei *op. cit.* 2003, 192.

<sup>25</sup> Szőnyi, Tamás: *Titkos írás. Állambiztonsági szolgálat és irodalmi élet* 2. Budapest, Noran, 2012, 579.

<sup>26</sup> Charta '77 was a declaration by the Czechoslovak political opposition, issued in response to violations of human rights. The sentences handed down against its leaders prompted various solidarity actions, including one organized in Hungary.

<sup>27</sup> He also contributed a poem to the volume

<sup>28</sup> The essay was to have appeared in the 1980/2 issue of the Kecskemét-based journal.

addressed, among other things, restricted access to information, the lack of democracy, and the responsibilities of the intellectual in public life. Although Dániel Hatvani, editor-in-chief of *Forrás*, considered the piece 'challenging' – given its sharp criticism of the regime – he was willing to risk publishing it.<sup>29</sup> In the end, however, the essay could not appear: on the instruction of the county party committee, the printed copies had to be physically cut with a blade to remove the text, which was replaced with another piece. The excised essay then circulated in samizdat form, and reports were still being produced about the phenomenon a year later, which 'recognized the circle of writers and intellectuals gathered around Sándor Csoóri as a key group within the enemy-opposition, organizing itself into a movement.'<sup>30</sup>

### 'YOU CAN ARGUE WITH CSOÓRI, ...'

There had been signs pointing towards what unfolded at the general assembly, among them the 1979 writers' meeting in Lakitelek, where the younger generation of writers – gathered under the protective umbrella of Gyula Illyés – struck a sharply critical tone against the one-party system, attacking its cultural policies.<sup>31</sup> FIJAK<sup>32</sup> sought ways to appear in public life

while operating independently of official structures. Although FIJAK's activities were suspended by the Secretariat of the Writers' Union, the Executive Committee soon overturned its decision.<sup>33</sup>

Preparations for the general assembly included a series of conversations which András Fodor held in September with writers considered particularly influential. He later forwarded the experience of these meetings to the Secretariat in the form of a report. The strictly confidential document, titled 'Report on the Individual Conversations', described Csoóri as follows: 'You can argue with Csoóri, but he represents his principles with talent and integrity. There are hardly any like him left; they ought to be looked after.'<sup>34</sup>

At the meeting of the MSZMP's Agitation and Propaganda Committee on 17 November, one of the agenda items was preparation for the forthcoming general assembly, based on an informational report issued by the Ministry of Culture. The report listed the problems expected to arise at the assembly (for example, the situation of Hungarians beyond the borders) and mentioned Sándor Csoóri by name: '*Account must also be taken of the emergence of the "counter-people's front" of Csoóri and Mészöly, which enjoys particular popularity among certain groups of young*

*writers. The danger of opposition-mindedness persists within literary life, and may even grow. One must therefore reckon – even at the general assembly itself – with the demagogic, and indeed openly oppositional, raising of such issues as nationality questions, demographic decline, alcoholism, suicide, and the publication restrictions (partly related to these issues), as well as with proposals for organizing literary workshops along ideological lines.'*<sup>35</sup>

The general assembly was ultimately held on 12–13 December 1981. On the second day, Sándor Csoóri delivered his 'Renunciation of Consensus' speech,<sup>36</sup> in which he voiced sharp criticism of the political leadership on several points. '*The fact that politics has long been afraid of what might happen at this general assembly was not primarily our failure, but theirs,*' he declared. He went on to argue that the 'Aczél method' – that is, the practice whereby a few selected writers (Tibor Déry, Gyula Illyés, and so on) would settle the great questions of the age together with Aczél – had failed. The new generation, he insisted, would no longer accept this format; from now on, such discussions must be extended to the Writers' Union as a whole.<sup>37</sup> Csoóri later assessed the general assembly in an interview: '*That day was a real struggle, hand-to-hand combat, but I must say it ended successfully.*

<sup>29</sup> Hatvani, Dániel: *Tilalomfák árnyékában. Egy irodalmi főszerkesztő emlékirata*. Budapest, Püski, 1997, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Müller, Rolf: Célkeresztben a Forrás. Kísérlet egy állambiztonsági történet rekonstrukciójára. *Forrás*, 43/1, 2011. 78–93. [https://epa.oszk.hu/02900/02931/00139/pdf/EPA02931\\_forras\\_2011\\_1\\_078-093.pdf](https://epa.oszk.hu/02900/02931/00139/pdf/EPA02931_forras_2011_1_078-093.pdf) (Accessed: 5 November 2025.)

<sup>31</sup> *Jegyzőkönyv a Magyar Írók Szövetsége 1981. december 12-13-i közgyűléséről*. Ed. Szeredi, Pál. Piliszentkereszt, Barangoló Kiadó, 2020, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Young Writers' Attila József Circle

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>34</sup> HU-RETÖRKIL X.5. Internal and Central Archives of the Hungarian Writers' Union, Secretariat Documents, Box 51, Unit 2. *Jelentés az egyéni beszélgetésekről (1981. IX. 6–14.)*.

<sup>35</sup> *Jegyzőkönyv az Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottság 1981. november 17-i üléséről*. MNL OL M-KS 288-41/376 ő. e. 5BF77E476CDB4B38002DE87F6DB83AA6.pdf (Accessed 29 October 2025.)

<sup>36</sup> Pintér, M. Lajos: *Ellenzékben 1968–1987*. Lakitelek, Antológia, 2007, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Szeredi *op. cit.* 202, 223–227.

*In the life of the Writers' Union this was the day when, unlike at any previous assembly, we finally carried everything through democratically – above all, the election.*<sup>38</sup> The election strengthened the position of the *népi* camp within the union: according to the Executive Committee's decision, one of the organization's vice-presidents became Gyula Fekete, while Sándor Csoóri and István Csurka were both elected members of the presidency.<sup>39</sup>

During the 1980s, the one-party system faced setback after setback. The dictatorship tried to fight back through censorship – including against Sándor Csoóri – in an effort to suppress voices raising uncomfortable topics. A major storm was stirred by Csoóri's preface *Kapaszkodás a megmaradásért* (Clinging to Survival) to Miklós Duray's book *Kutyaszorítóban* (In a Tight Spot), in which the author once again examined the situation of Hungarians beyond the borders, painting a bleak picture. The preface was discussed even at an extraordinary meeting of the Writers' Union's Presidency, and in the summer of 1983 the Political Committee imposed a one-year ban on Csoóri's publishing activity.

Joint actions uniting the *népi* opposition grew ever more frequent in the 1980s. Csoóri was among the signatories of the 'Letter of the 19' (1984), which focused, among other things, on the situation of Hungarians across the borders and on the demand to permit the establishment of a new periodical.<sup>40</sup> In June 1985, Csoóri was one of the speakers at the Monor meeting – organized jointly with the so-called democratic opposition. In his paper 'Eltemetetlen gondok a Dunántájon' (Unburied Troubles in the Danube Region) he once again concentrated on the situation of ethnic Hungarians beyond the borders, deeming the Kádár regime's policies in this regard misguided.<sup>41</sup> A few months after Monor he also took part in the Antológia evening held at Lakitelek, organized by Sándor Lezsák and attended by roughly five hundred people, where illustrations created by visual artists for poems were presented. Two of Csoóri's poems were featured: one written upon the death of László Nagy (*Furulya-csonk a szánkon*, or 'A Broken Flute at Our Mouths') and another in praise of Poland (*Senkid, barátod* – 'Your No One, Your Friend'). The event – whose 1956 associations were unmistakable<sup>42</sup> – was of great significance. Béla Petrik writes

at the beginning of the volume on the occasion: 'Before this evening, one finds hardly any event in Hungarian history of such weight – domestic, public, commemorating and honouring the 1956 Revolution – thus demonstratively standing against the existing regime.'<sup>43</sup>

The large-scale gathering paved the way for the meeting held two years later, likewise in Lakitelek, at which the Hungarian Democratic Forum formally unfurled its banner. Before that, however, came the 1986 general assembly of the Writers' Union...

### THE 1986 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The 1986 general assembly<sup>44</sup> was preceded by even greater anticipation than the previous one – both within the party-state and among system-critical writers.<sup>45</sup> At the November event – the major prelude to which had been the *Tiszatáj* affair<sup>46</sup> – the *népi* camp confronted cultural policymakers more forcefully than ever before. Months before the assembly, on 21 August, a meeting of the Presidium was held at which Sándor Csoóri challenged the representatives of the authorities present, most notably András Knopp, in blunt terms. The writer criticized the lack of clarity surrounding the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 381.

<sup>39</sup> HU-RETÖRKIL X.5. Internal and Central Archives of the Hungarian Writers' Union, Secretariat Documents, Box 53, Unit 1. *A Magyar Írók Szövetségének 1981. december 12-13.-án tartott közgyűlésén megválasztott választmány 1981. december 21.-én első választmányi ülésén választotta meg az írószövetség új tisztségviselőit.* (22 December 1981.)

<sup>40</sup> In 1985, the Bethlen Gábor Foundation was finally able to begin its activities with ministerial authorisation.

<sup>41</sup> Jónás Róbert: A monori tanácskozás. In: *A rendszerváltás mérföldkövei*. Szerk. Házi Balázs – Jónás Róbert – Nagymihály Zoltán – Rapali Vivien – Strausz Péter. Budapest, RETÖRKI, 2020. 34–39.

<sup>42</sup> Among other works, Gyula Illyés's famous poem *Egy mondat a zsarnokságról* (A Sentence on Tyranny) was recited.

<sup>43</sup> *Élő Antológia* – Lakitelek, 22 October 1985, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> A detailed background to the general assembly is set out by M. Lajos Pintér in his book (Pintér, M. Lajos: *Ellenzékben 1968–1987*. Lakitelek, Antológia, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> The authorities even considered postponing the event.

<sup>46</sup> The *Tiszatáj* affair erupted over Gáspár Nagy's poem (*A fiú naplójából*, or 'From a Boy's Poem') referring to the events of 1956, as a result of which the editors were dismissed and the journal was banned.

journal's case and the absence of honest speech.<sup>47</sup>

In November, in preparation for the assembly, the Scientific, Public Education and Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the MSZMP submitted two reports to the Political Committee, which discussed both documents (on 4 and 18 November). Drawing on the earlier report, János Kádár singled out Csoóri by name: *'I would not say, for example, that Csoóri is an enemy, because one does not easily attach such labels to people, but Csoóri did let it slip. He objected to the Party's leading role, to the one-party system, to the establishment of cooperatives, and to the restriction of the churches. I could scarcely express more clearly the existence of another platform. On these questions we must clash – whatever he or his followers may subjectively intend.'*<sup>48</sup> In his remarks, the Party's First Secretary described the 1981 general assembly as a coup and warned firmly against allowing anything similar to happen again, stressing that he did not want another leadership hostile to the system presiding over the Writers' Union for the next five years.<sup>49</sup>

The general assembly was eventually held on 29–30 November. Several issues surfaced during the tense proceedings, including the *Tiszatáj* affair, the silencing of István Csurka, and the case

of *Hitel*.<sup>50</sup> In his speech on the second day, Sándor Csoóri complained, among other things, that over the preceding five years the authorities had stifled the Union's initiatives ('reform began, and then they started to throttle it'), and he recalled both the rejection of his own proposed journal and the measures taken against *Tiszatáj*.<sup>51</sup> The outcome of the assembly was the strengthening of the *népi* camp's position. Many from this circle entered the 71-member executive committee (among them Sándor Csoóri, Gyula Fekete, István Csurka and Mihály Czine); Csoóri and Csurka likewise appeared in the presidency, while Fekete became one of the vice-presidents – though they failed to secure either the presidency (which went to Tibor Cseres) or the post of general secretary (taken by Miklós Veress). In its report, the Cultural Department stated that 'the camp of Sándor Csoóri's supporters has strengthened; they are practically in the majority within the executive committee.'<sup>52</sup> As a consequence of the newly formed leadership, a wave of resignations ensued over the following months among writers loyal to the party-state.

In 1987, Sándor Csoóri and his circle set about organizing the Lakitelek meeting, a gathering at which they intended to discuss, on a broader scale, the prospects of the Hungarian nation. This meeting would

then become the genesis of the Hungarian Democratic Forum.

Throughout the Kádár era, the Writers' Union was one of the most important arenas for the *népi* group, where – within legal boundaries – they could express their views and even secure the election of their own candidates to leading positions within the organization. Over the years, Sándor Csoóri sought to make use of every available opportunity – including the various forums of the Hungarian Writers' Union – to keep the hardships and contradictions of the Kádár regime on the agenda, first as an ordinary member, then later using the weight of his positions in the executive committee and the presidency. In a later interview he recalled the period in the following terms:

*'We have the right, in this country, to say what we think and what we feel. At the time, we set about turning the Writers' Union into a real "stronghold", deliberately, because it was the only public space, the only kind of 'parliamentary democracy': anyone could say whatever they thought...'*<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> HU-RETÖRKIL X.5. Internal and Central Archives of the Hungarian Writers' Union, Secretariat Documents, Box 97, Unit 1. *Jegyzőkönyv a Magyar Írók Szövetségének 1986. augusztus 21-én, csütörtökön, 14 órai kezdettel tartott elnökségi üléséről.*

<sup>48</sup> Kádár János elvtárs felszólalása a Politikai Bizottság 1986. november 4-i ülésén. 5. MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5/982. ő. e. HU\_MNL\_OL\_M-KS\_288\_05\_09820.pdf (Accessed: 5 November 2025).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For years, the *népi* camp had wanted to launch an independent periodical.

<sup>51</sup> Kiss Gy. *op. cit.* 2016, 215–218.

<sup>52</sup> Pintér, M. *op. cit.* 2007, 163.

<sup>53</sup> Szécsi Árpád: *Rendszerváltó mozgalom. A Magyar Demokrata Fórum előzményei és korai története, 1979–1990.* Budapest, RETÖRKI Institute and Archive, 2023, 59.

Tamás Endrédi

# War-Song: In Search of a Lost Jancsó Movie

## The Story of an Unusual József Bem Biopic



Since film has existed, there has been great interest in historical films. Hungary was no exception to this, already in the 1920s historical silent movies were produced in sequence, most of which have unfortunately been lost.<sup>1</sup> The genre gained new strength in the 1950s, as film-making was always a particularly important area for the ruling powers of the day, thus for the communist authorities as well – and subsequent successes proved that there was a serious demand for historical movies on the part of the viewers, regardless of the director or the concept. Among others, *A kőszívű ember fiai* (1965), *Egy magyar nábob* and *Kárpáthy Zoltán* (1966), and *Egri csillagok* (1968) were all novel adaptations directed by Zoltán Várkonyi. The cultural policy of the regime gladly took advantage of this, just as filmmakers did so – not without some overlap.

In the frame of the new world order which emerged after the Second World War, Hungary got

into the Eastern Bloc, and then between 1946 and 1949 its real integration took place after the elimination of the parties outside the Hungarian Communist Party, then from 1948 the Hungarian Working People's Party by employing the so called salami slicing tactics and clear electoral fraud. 1948 was the 'year of change', when Mátyás Rákosi became the leader of the party and the country and under his autocratic rule, which lasted until 1953 (Stalin's death), established a Stalinist-style regime, the basis of which was the police state, open violence and collectivization.<sup>2</sup>

During the Rákosi dictatorship the frames of cultural policy were certainly severely limited compared to the Horthy era (and later to the Kádár era).<sup>3</sup> Socialist realism was imported from the Soviet Union, folk culture was forced, without forgetting the Hungarian character of the culture. This new, socialist, realist, Hungarian folk culture was consistently represented

by József Révai as Minister of Education, whether it was literature or film.<sup>4</sup> *'We have not made enough effort to get to know Soviet culture in depth'* – he formulated it. Another quotation by him: *'We need to learn this culture constantly, to enable its organic and permanent influence on our emerging new culture.'*<sup>5</sup> In his speech at the second Congress of the Hungarian Working People's Party, he said: *'An integral part of the patriotic education of our people is the revival of the great progressive traditions of our history and culture.'*<sup>6</sup> In connection with the premiere of the film *Ludas Matyi* he also said the following: *'Our culture, socialist in content and national in form, is based not least on the culture of the Hungarian people, of which the great critics and exposers of our past – who thereby pronounced the judgment of the people – are an inseparable part.'*<sup>7</sup>

A perfect reflection of this view is the film entitled *Feltámadott a tenger* (The Sea Has Risen,

<sup>1</sup> There may be some exceptions: some film frames from the 1923 film *Egri csillagok* found in Mara Jankovszky's legacy proved to be an important discovery. See: <https://nfi.hu/filmarchivum/kutatasoktatas/kincskereso/egy-lepessel-kozelebb-az-egri-csillagok-elso-filmvaltozatahoz.html> (Last download: 21 May 2024.)

<sup>2</sup> Lásd: Békés, Csaba: *Enyhülés és emancipáció. Magyarország, a szovjet blokk és a nemzetközi politika 1944-1991*, Budapest, 2019, 29-75.; Gyarmati, György: *Rendszertitkok szolgálkál és szolgálatokkal*, Pécs-Budapest, Kronosz-ÁBTL, 2019, 121-181.; *A vidék szovjetizálása*, szerk: Horváth, Gergely Krisztián – Csikós, Gábor – Ö. Kovács, József, Budapest, Jaffa Kiadó, 2023, Kalmár, Melinda: *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer 1945-1990*, Budapest, Osiris, 2014.; Romsics, Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században*, Budapest, Osiris, 2010, 271-384.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the period, see: Szilágyi, Gábor: *Tűzkeresztység. A magyar játékfilm története 1945-1953*. Budapest, Magyar Filmintézet, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Agárdi, Péter: *Nemzeti értékviták és kultúrafelfogások 1847-2014*. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2015, 182-186.

<sup>5</sup> Komor, Imre: *A szovjet kultúra nagy iskolája, Művelt Nép*, 1950/2, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Jókai Mór emlékezete*. Ed. Margócsy, István. Budapest, Osiris, 2022, 239.

<sup>7</sup> Révai, József: *Ludas Matyi. Művelt Nép*, 1950/2, 17.

1953, Kálmán Nadasdy), which deals with the events of 1848–49 in Hungary from a socialist realist perspective, with Sándor Petőfi and József Bem as the main characters. The film ends with the victorious battle of Nagyszeben on 11 March, 1849, and an important part of it is the awakening and involvement of the folk hero – and through him, the entire people – in the events of the Hungarian War of Independence. Other important motifs include the history-shaping power of the people, class struggle, and the cult of personality, as well as the emergence of the idea of reconciliation between peoples – a thoroughly Hungarian socialist film closely linked to the Soviet filmmaking tradition.<sup>8</sup> However, soon new winds were blowing: in the summer of 1953, there was a change in Hungarian domestic politics with the Nagy Imre government coming to power. Centralized, production-oriented filmmaking<sup>9</sup> was transformed, Révai was succeeded by József Darvas, and socialist realism took a back seat in the following years.<sup>10</sup>

Following Rákosi's final downfall and the suppression of the Revolution of 1956, the system had to be rebuilt. From Moscow, this task was assigned to János

Kádár, who remained in power until 1989, and the era was also named after him. Compared to Rákosi, the more permissive features of the new regime started to take shape in the first half of the 1960s, the frames of which became even more permissive, as time passed. That is why the regime is sometimes referred to as 'soft dictatorship' or abroad it is better known as 'goulash communism', although the system undeniably stayed a dictatorship, even if it resorted to open violence less and less frequently.<sup>11</sup>

Proof of this can be found, for example, in the partial 'closure' of cultural life in the early 1970s as a result of the Prague Spring of 1968. This resulted, among other things, in the decision of the Central Committee, which became famous as the philosopher's trial; the trial against Miklós Haraszti in connection with his book entitled *Darabbér* (A Worker in a Worker's State); the removal of Yvette Bíró, editor of *Filmkultúra*, from the magazine and the domestic cultural scene, and later her forcing to emigration; and the investigation of Konrád and Szelényi in connection with their book *Az értelmiség útja az osztályhatalomhoz* (The Intellectuals' Path to Class

Power), which was ultimately banned in Hungary, leading to their emigration as well.<sup>12</sup>

After a transitional period of searching for a new direction, the situation stabilised between 1961 and 1963, and the foundations were laid for a more decentralised system that gave filmmakers greater freedom of movement, with the emergence of creative groups, the termination of the Central Dramaturgy, and the establishment of MAFILM (Hungarian Film Production and Service Company).<sup>13</sup> Another important addition was the appearance and application of the so called 3T consolidation related to György Aczél:<sup>14</sup> in addition to 'prohibited' and 'supported', the category of 'tolerated' also appeared,<sup>15</sup> which gradually widened during the period and interacted with the 3P categories of the new wave artists: politics, poetics, and progression. The artists accepted the conditions and partially professed socialist values.<sup>16</sup>

The so called parabolic films in technical terms constituted a very characteristic form of socialist Hungarian cinematography, thanks to which a narrow system criticism increasingly tolerated over time could appear during

<sup>8</sup> *Magyar filmek 1896–2021. MMA Lexikonok*. Ed. Gelencsér, Gábor et al. Budapest, MMA Kiadó, 2012, 159–160.

<sup>9</sup> Varga, Balázs: *Filmirányítás, gyártástörténet és politika Magyarországon 1957–1963*. Dissertation. Budapest, 2008, 12–17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>11</sup> See: Papp, István: *A magyar kommunizmus, 1918–1989*. Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2024; Kalmár, Melinda: *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer 1945–1990*, Budapest, Osiris, 2014; Romsics, Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században*, Budapest, Osiris, 2010, 399–532.

<sup>12</sup> For the events, see: Weiss, János: *A filozófusper és következményei. Történelmi-filozófiai rekonstrukció*, translated by: Berger, Viktor, *Fordulat* 2010/10., 168–183; Tóth, Eszter Zsófia: *"Szinte rutinosan nyeltem a gumicsövet". Haraszti Miklós Darabbér pere (1973–1974) és emlékezete*, *Clio Műhelytanulmányok* 2020/7.; Zsugán, István: *Volt egyszer egy Filmkultúra... Budapesti beszélgetés Bíró Yvette-tel*, *Filmvilág* 1990/01., 5–7., online: [https://www.filmvilag.hu/xista\\_frame.php?cikk\\_id=4676](https://www.filmvilag.hu/xista_frame.php?cikk_id=4676); The arrest of György Konrád and Iván Szelényi in 1974, online: <https://retorki.hu/olvasoszoba/konrad-gyorgy-es-szelenyi-ivan-1974-es-orizetbe-velete> (Last download: 31 October 2023.)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 69–71.

<sup>14</sup> György Aczél (1917–1991) cultural politician, one of the leading figures of cultural life during the Kádár era, with his personal network of contacts he ensured compliance with the current policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. See: Révai Új Lexikona I. kötet, Editor-in-chief: Kollega Tarsoly, István, Szekszárd, Babits Kiadó, 1999, Article on *György Aczél*, 76.; Földes, György: *Ívek és töréspontok. Gazdaság, politika, ideológia 1945 után*, Budapest, 2018, 211–235; Révész, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk*, Budapest, Sík Kiadó, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> 3T in Hungarian: túrt (tolerated), tiltott (prohibited), támogatott (supported).

<sup>16</sup> Gelencsér, Gábor: *Közlepkép: Portrék, témák, formák a magyar film történetéből*, Budapest, Gondolat, 2022, 334–335.



| Agnus Dei, imdb.com

the Kádár era.<sup>17</sup> The greatest Hungarian representative of this genre, and the only one in this form, was Miklós Jancsó, who spent a significant part of his career making such films, achieving success both in Hungary and, especially in the second half of the 1960s, internationally. Jancsó began shooting propaganda newsreels and documentaries in the 1950s, and began to find his own voice in 1963 with the film *Oldás és kötés* (Cantata).

He first appeared as a modernist with the film *Szegénylegények* (The Round-Up) in 1965, in which he incorporated parabolic interpretation, and which caught the attention of the foreign professionals as well and was nominated for a prize at Cannes. His subsequent films all dealt with historical topics in his own modernist parabolic style: *Csillagosok, katonák* (The Red and the White, 1967), *Csend és kiáltás* (Silence and Cry, 1968), *Fényes szelek* (The Confrontation, 1968), *Sirokkó* (1969), *Égi bárány*

(*Agnus Dei*, 1970), *Még kér a nép* (Red Psalm, 1971). These films with their allegorical nature were in contrast with the historical tableaux and novel adaptations connected among others to the name of Várkonyi, increasingly alienating the given movie topic from its historical context, elevating it to the level of a general parable. A sole exception during this period was the film entitled *A pacifista* (The Pacifist, *La pacifista*, 1970) shot in Italy, featuring Monica Vitti, the Italian star of the era.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, international attention surrounding his films continued to grow: his film *Csillagosok* made in Soviet co-production could have won at Cannes if the film festival had not been closed in 1968 amid the revolutionary atmosphere of the student protests.<sup>19</sup> But in 1972, he received recognition for his film *Még kér a nép*: it was nominated for the Palme d'Or in the Best Film and Best Director categories at Cannes, winning the latter.<sup>20</sup>

This is how the idea of making a film with Andrzej Wajda occurred. That time, Wajda was one of the most important and renowned directors of Polish cinematography, a member of the 'Polish school' emerging in the mid-1950s, which elevated Polish cinema to the ranks of the greatest of the world's film art.<sup>21</sup> From this period of Wajda's very rich oeuvre *Csatorna* (Kanal, 1957), *Hamu és gyémánt* (Ashes and Diamonds, 1958), *Tájkép csata után* (Landscape After Battle, 1970), *A márványember* (Man of Marble, 1977) and *A vasember* (Man of Iron, 1981) should be mentioned. Jancsó's and Wajda's careers crossed paths several times, they had an influence on each other, thus it could have been a logical idea to make a film about a historical figure important to both countries: Józef Bem, that is Bem apó ('Grandpa Bem'), the hero of the War of Independence of 1831 and 1848-49.

Józef Bem (1794-1850) started his career as a talented artillery officer fighting in Napoleon's Russian campaign in 1812, then he distinguished himself at Ostrołęka, in one of the battles of the Polish uprising in 1831, and was later promoted to general. As a prominent member of the Polish émigré community, he organized their escape to France. In 1848 he wanted to come to Hungary with the plan of a Polish legion, but he was stranded in Vienna because of the Revolution of 6 October, where he fought against the imperial forces as

<sup>17</sup> For more on parabolism characteristic of the era, see: Gelencsér, Gábor: *Politikai poétika. Jancsó és a hetvenes évek parabolái*, Metropolis, 2001/3, 10-25. Online: <https://metropolis.org.hu/politikai-poetika-1> (Last download: 20 October 2025.)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 143-149.

<sup>19</sup> Szekfű, András: *Így filmeztünk 3.: Jancsó és köre*, Budapest, MMA Kiadó, 2021, 265.

<sup>20</sup> See: [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0417352/awards/?ref\\_=nm\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0417352/awards/?ref_=nm_awd) (Last download: 11 June 2024.)

<sup>21</sup> For more on the 'Polish school' and socialist Polish film, see: Kovács, István: *Film - Költészet - Történelem. A 20. század lengyel filmjei és rendezői személyes közelképekben*, Magyar Napló, Budapest, 2023, 19-63.; moreover: <https://culture.pl/en/article/the-polish-film-school> (Last download: 20 October 2025.)

commander-in-chief. After fleeing from the city, he became the commander of the Transylvanian army and – without major reinforcement – he achieved significant success against the imperial forces. Following the suppression of the Hungarian War of Independence, he fled to the Ottoman Empire, where he converted to Islam and served as Pasha Murad, taking part in the defence of Aleppo until his death.<sup>22</sup>

The press first reported on the film in January 1972: at that time, it was still only a possible film idea, and it was treated as a fact that it would be a joint production with the Poles, with Wajda as producer and Jancsó as director. The news was basically about the conclusion of the annual plan of the Polish and Hungarian film artists' associations.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, film executive director István Kondor wrote a letter to Polish Secretary of State Czesław Wiśniewski, giving way for the film to be made on the Hungarian side. However, as he wrote, 'it is clear from Miklós Jancsó's outline that he imagines making the film with the use of a large technical apparatus and the movement of masses of fighting soldiers', nevertheless, Hungarian

film production is not prepared to make such a large-scale film due to the high financial and technical requirements and lack of experience. Therefore, the film will be shot in Poland, in a Polish studio.<sup>24</sup>

The realisation of the film became certain by the end of March, with the aforementioned creative team: Wajda as producer with his creative team, and Jancsó as director, as announced by the two directors in Warsaw.<sup>25</sup> The news swept through the Hungarian press in the weeks and months that followed: Jancsó's film about Bem was in preparation! In his letter wrote in April, Wiśniewski indicated that Polish filmmakers were open to the film idea, and Jancsó discussed the film with Wajda, who was also interested in the opportunity. According to the agreement concluded in Warsaw, Jancsó could submit a proposal for the financial and material resources absolutely necessary for the production of the film, then sent the finished script to Wajda, and based on the data, they examined the possibility of starting filming around August-September 1972 and of borrowing horses and other filming equipment from Czechoslovakia and the

GDR. Following the clarification, a specific proposal was received from the Polish side regarding the draft of the co-production agreement.<sup>26</sup>

In May 1972, it became clear that the historical framework of the screenplay, written once again in collaboration with Gyula Hernádi<sup>27</sup>, was the Transylvanian campaign, but primarily described Bem's military-political ideas and philosophy. As the article reports on the film: 'Bem will not be a deheroized hero, because, in the words of Miklós Jancsó, no fault can be found in him.' The producer is Andrzej Wajda, and the film about Bem, which is still untitled, will be the first film by Wajda's creative team. Costs will be equally shared by the Polish and Hungarian parties, the main character will be played by a Polish actor, and the film will be shot in Poland.<sup>28</sup> A letter dated 4 May, 1972 reveals that Kondor, Jancsó, and János Soproni, director of Hunnia Film Studio, agreed that the film could only be shot in the spring of 1973, and that Jancsó would work out the script and budget plans in the meantime.<sup>29</sup> At this point, it became certain that Jancsó would be joined by another of his regular collaborators: cinematographer János Kende.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For more on Bem, see: Kovács, István: *Bem tábornok. Az örök remények hőse*, Magyar Napló, Budapest, 2014; in Polish: *Józef Bem. Bohater wiecznych nadziei*, Rytm, 2002; Jadwiga, Chudzikowska: *Generał Bem*, Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990; moreover: [https://www.inyourpocket.com/tarnow/jozef-bem-son-of-tarnow-hero-of-three-nations\\_70535f](https://www.inyourpocket.com/tarnow/jozef-bem-son-of-tarnow-hero-of-three-nations_70535f) (Last download: 20 October 2025.)

<sup>23</sup> Közös gondjaikról, koprodukciós tervekről tárgyaltak lengyel és magyar filmművészek. (Polish and Hungarian filmmakers discussed their common concerns and co-production plans). *Magyar Nemzet*, 1972. 02. 29. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Kondor István levele Czesław Wiśniewski államtitkár részére (The Letter of István Kondor to Secretary of State Czesław Wiśniewski), MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 137. d.

<sup>25</sup> Magyar-lengyel koprodukciós film készül Bem tábornokról (A film about General Bem in Hungarian and Polish co-production is about to be made), *Magyar Hírlap*, 1972. 03. 31. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Czesław Wiśniewski államtitkár levele Kondor István részére (The Letter of Secretary of State Czesław Wiśniewski to István Kondor), MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 137. d.

<sup>27</sup> Gyula Hernádi (1926-2005) writer, scriptwriter. His literary works were began to be published in 1955. Some years later István Nemeskürty – that time dramaturgical director of the News and the Documentary Film Studio – got him acquainted with Jancsó, with whom they became inseparable creative partners until their deaths, calling each other 'identical twins', with more than twenty film collaborations to their credit. For more on his works, see: Marx, József: *Hernádi Gyula és a film. Életrajzi esszé*, Budapest, Kortárs Kiadó, 2007; Pósa, Zoltán: *Hernádi Gyula*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Regős, Sándor: Jancsó és Wajda. *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, 1972. 05. 06. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Kondor István levele Czesław Wiśniewski államtitkár részére (The Letter of István Kondor to Secretary of State Czesław Wiśniewski), MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 139. d.

<sup>30</sup> Veress, József: Rendezői portrék: Jancsó Miklós, *Alföld*, 1972/8, 75.

Concerning the production, the rest of the year passed quietly. It turned out only from the short message of Barbara Pec-Ślesicka, the prospective production manager of the film, who frequently worked together with Wajda, that the Polish partners had been informed of the acceptance of the script and they urged István Kondor to send it to the Polish Ministry of Culture. Without this, the negotiations on the making of the film could not begin, and the production schedule could not be prepared.<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of the following year, the title of the film was made public: *Csatadal* (War-Song), taking the title of the poem<sup>32</sup> written by Sándor Petőfi as Bem's aide-de-camp.<sup>33</sup>

On 19 March 1973 István Kondor went to Warsaw for three days, taking, among other things, the Polish-Hungarian cooperation work plan and the 68-page script of the film with him.<sup>34</sup>

The difficulties were indicated by the fact that delegations were still coming and going in connection with the film even in the summer. Jancsó – as recent Kossuth Prize winner, commuting between Tunis and Hungary because of post-production works on the film *Technika és rítus* (The Technique and the Rite, *La tecnica e il rito*) – shared some important

details in June regarding who would appear in *Csatadal* on the Hungarian side. Even back then, it was Jancsó's usual working method to take not only part of the crew but also the actors from film to film. Thus, he selected the Hungarian actors of *Csatadal* from the film *Még kér a nép*: Andrea Drahota, András Kozák, István Bujtor, Lajos Balázsovits, and Mari Törőcsik, who was also a Kossuth Prize winner.<sup>35</sup>

The four-page abstract by Jancsó begins with a quotation from Engels: '*Polish people are international soldiers of the revolution*'. The film would not have elaborated the complete biography or the shorter version of '*the most talented member of the 19th century Polish revolutionary spirit*', but more precisely it would have been '*a memorial and tribute to Bem's military and political ideas and deeds*'. It would have presented a few days of the military events of 1849, including the last two major battles. The sources were the memoirs and recollections of Chief of Staff János Czetz<sup>36</sup> and Colonel Sándor Teleki, the 'wild count', Chief Quartermaster of the Transylvanian army.

Based on this, Bem's tactics and strategy were revolutionary and ahead of their time. He noticed at a young age that revolutionary

armies were always smaller in number, less well-equipped and less well-trained than regular forces and they could not be organised in the same way. For this reason, he tried to compensate for the similar weaknesses of the Transylvanian army: he surrounded himself with young people, his soldiers were less than 20 years old, his high command consisted of officers around 25 years of age, many of whom were Polish and Viennese legionnaires, Belgians, English people and from among the nationalities, the Romanian Avram Iancu also joined him.<sup>37</sup> One of the driving forces behind the victory is revolutionary enthusiasm, '*that is why he treats Sándor Petőfi as a friend, almost like a son*', and distributes his revolutionary poems among his soldiers.

Bem's approach to the role and operation of artillery was also new. Napoleonic warfare relied on disciplined infantry fighting as a unit, with artillery playing '*only a preparatory and intimidating role*'. In contrast, artillery officer Bem '*uses cannons almost as hand weapons*'. He casts smaller and more mobile cannons, '*always takes them to the front line, always fires with grapeshot, always tows the artillery equipment last, taking the risk that they may fall into the hands of the enemy*'. He recruits

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Ślesicka, a film gyártásvezetőjének üzenete Kondor István részére (The message of Barbara Ślesicka, production manager of the film to István Kondor), MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 143. d.

<sup>32</sup> The poem can be read here: <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Verstar-verstar-otven-kolto-osszes-verse-2/petofi-sandor-DFB2/1848-F625/csatadal-FB46/> (Last download: 11 June 2024.); the English translation by William N. Loew: <https://mek.oszk.hu/06500/06567/06567.htm#8> (Last download: 24 November 2025.)

<sup>33</sup> Soproni, János: Témák, módszerek filmek, *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, 1973. 01. 06. 11.

<sup>34</sup> László Tibor levele a vámhatóság részére (The Letter of Tibor László to the Customs Authority), MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 137. d.

<sup>35</sup> Szűts, István: „A filmművészet mindig mozgósít”, *Új Szó*, 1973. 06. 17. 10.

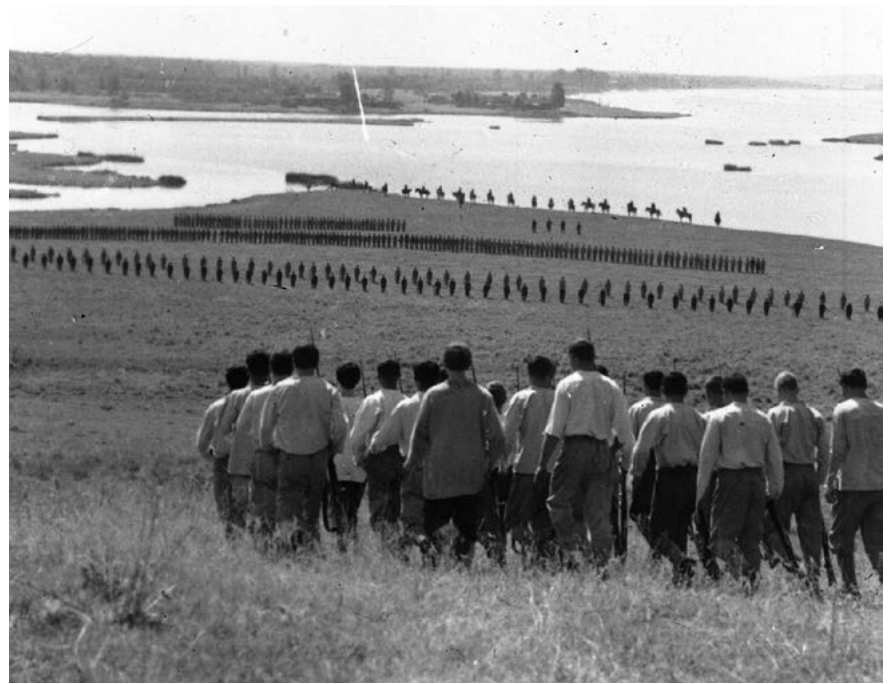
<sup>36</sup> In the document: „Czecz”.

<sup>37</sup> Literally it says: '*He wins over a number of ethnic leaders, including the Romanian Avram Iancu*'. This is understandably closer to the contemporary Hungarian socialist historical perspective, where '*we respectfully regard Avram Iancu, A. Papiu Ilarianu, and Ioan Buteanu of the spring of 1848, just like Avram Iancu and Ioan Buteanu of the spring of 1849*', although it acknowledges that '*there is hardly a revolutionary leader in Transylvania in 1848-49 whose actions do not reveal such contradictions*' (see: Trócsányi, Zsolt: *Az erdélyi parasztság története 1790-1849*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1956, 492.). According to current evaluations, after the agreement concluded between Kossuth and Bălcescu, the latter himself negotiated successfully with Iancu not to fight against Bem and the Hungarians. See: Berindei, Dan: *Nicolae Bălcescu en Hongrie (1849)*, In: *Auflösung historischer Konflikte im Donauraum*, Ed. Suppan, Arnold. MTA TTI, MTA TKK, Europa Institut, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2011, 435–447.

his supplies from Székely bell founders such as Áron Gábor, and uses tough, small mountain horses to pull them, which also stand beside the cannons in actual battles, because Bem often changes the location of the cannons during the battle. His artillerymen are also *'reckless young men, mostly high school students'*, and Bem himself fights in the front line, and his soldiers adore him for his courage.<sup>38</sup>

In battle, he first attacks with artillery barrage, breaking the lines of the enemy and demoralising them, and then Bem's young, enthusiastic army, burning with revolutionary fervour, attacks using guerrilla-like tactics, storming the flanks and rear, while the cannons keep firing during the battle. He organises a guerrilla force from the Székely, Romanian, and Transylvanian Saxon population.

The two major battles presented in the film would have been the battle of Segesvár on 31 July 1849 and the battle of Temesvár on 9 August, where Petőfi died in the former, and Bem was wounded seriously in the latter. Although first he mentions that *'it is still unclear, why he changed his proven strategy and why he rushed headlong into the overwhelming force'*, but then he himself gives an answer to this, stating that *'he was then obviously tense and nervous'*, because the news of Görgey's intention to surrender spread far and wide. Instead, on 18 August, with his 700 horsemen, Székely and Hungarian people, 400 members of the Viennese and Polish legions and four cannons,



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he headed for the Turkish border. In a camp there, they replayed the battle of Temesvár, going through the mistakes of the decisive battle one by one, then, after the exercise, they handed over their weapons in tears.

Presumably this would have been the last scene of the film: *'They swear to stand by their revolutionary ideals until the end of their lives. As a seal to their oath, they one by one kiss their legendary leader, General Bem, on the cheek.'*<sup>39</sup>

In April 1972, Jancsó said that the film, based on the concept of his previous work, *Még kér a nép*, focuses on the aspirations of the heroes: how Bem and his army were able to fight against the Austrian imperial house superior to them, *'which was a powerful master and expert of manipulation'*, presenting *'the essentially modern ideas that he represented in his*

*person, or that can be seen in retrospect'*.<sup>40</sup> In an interview at the beginning of 1973, Gyula Hernádi spoke in more details about what they intend to realise. However, as a source for writing the script, he then only mentioned the memoirs of Count Sándor Teleki. They thought in terms of a dual structure: the beginning and the end would be a vision of a *'much larger dimension'*, while the middle would be a more stylized reality than the natural one.

At the beginning, one of Bem's soldiers would say about Petőfi's appearance, *'that's how they saw him, but he wasn't like that'* – and at the end, *'despite that, he was like that'*. According to Hernádi, they would have tried to *'keep the two in some kind of strange tension or bring them into tension, if possible'*. In other words, they tried to partially transpose their previous approach (as in the film *Még kér*

<sup>38</sup> The use of batteries in such a bold and innovative way, seeking to surprise the enemy was common practice for Bem. It is however doubtful that horses did not have to be pulled away from the cannons he cast. See: Csikány, Tamás: *Honvédtüzérség az 1848-49-es szabadságharcban*. Budapest, Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2000, 109-111.

<sup>39</sup> Jancsó, Miklós: Bem. Néhány gondolat egy lengyel-magyar koprodukcióban elkészítendő filmhez, MNL OL M-KS XIX-I-22, 137. d.

<sup>40</sup> Szekfű, András Ibid. 2021, 73.

a nép in 1972) and clash it in the 'historically more bound' film.<sup>41</sup>

However, the film was never made. Media interest has waned, there is no sign where *Csatadal* disappeared to or whether the possibility of realising the film with other artists emerged. Nowadays, it is not surprising when a difficult film production changes its producer, director, actors, or even its entire concept every few years, but we usually hear about this over the years. Ironically, after *Csatadal* only silence remained. It is interesting that according to the issue of the journal *Kisalföld* on 9 December 1992, this is what happened 20 years earlier: '... the new film by Miklós Jancsó about General József Bem, starring a Polish actor, was being shot'. Nevertheless, it is absolutely certain that on 9 December 1972 nothing began, considering that the urgent message of the production manager dates back to the previous month, and some months later delegations were still travelling between Warsaw and Budapest.<sup>42</sup>

What could have happened exactly?

The director and his collaborators did not say much about the failed *Csatadal* – there are many other things to talk about given his long and rich oeuvre – there is a grain of truth in each of them. József Marx mentions the film project in three biographical volumes. In one of them, he claims that

Jancsó 'wanted to focus on the figure of Murad Pasha, the adventurer, rather than General József Bem, who distinguished himself in the Battle of Ostroleka', but 'in the countries of the Polish freedom fighter and the Hungarian Bem apó, such a thing was out of the question'. Instead, after *Technika és rítus*, another RAI film followed in 1973 in Italy, entitled *Róma visszaköveteli Cézárt*, or in another version, *Róma új cézár akar* (Rome Wants Another Caesar, Roma riuuole Cesare).<sup>43</sup>

In another volume, he writes in somewhat greater detail: 'When the real historical dimensions of the personality revered as Bem apó in Hungarian history came to the forefront (adventurer?), who, after the defeat at Temesvár, was presumably able to take on the role of military commander in Syria in Turkish pay without any particular shock, then the sky darkened over the plan. Even though the director had already been looking for a location in Poland, in the *Beskids*'. However, based on the abstract and the outline (not a biographical film, but a tribute to his military philosophy), the last phase of his life does not fit into the picture, so there seems to be no real reason for refusal. But it is likely that the fact that Jancsó and Hernádi included a recipe for Chinese turtle soup<sup>44</sup> in the first draft of the script, really could not move forward the negotiations with Wajda, which fact was also confirmed by Ferenc Grunwalsky in his memoirs.<sup>45</sup> The third

volume presents a more realistic view: Wajda would have filmed Hernádi Gyula's drama, *Falanszter* (Phalanstère). 'In exchange, he only asked the writer to persuade the director to be a little more realistic. He did not persuade him. The co-production fell through.'<sup>46</sup>

Two of Jancsó's important colleagues, cinematographers János Kende and Grunwalsky, bring us even closer to the correct answer. An interview with Kende conducted in the summer of 1973 reveals that they worked seriously on the film: 'I had many arguments about Bem's uniform, this was an important factor in making it stand out from nature, so it should be, I don't know, turquoise or something...'<sup>47</sup> However, he clearly states that the film will not be made 'this year' or 'in this lifetime'. He indicated that the reason was that Jancsó did not want to undertake the task, even though Kende really wanted to do it, so the contract was not signed.<sup>48</sup> Grunwalsky was more seriously involved in the film's affairs because he negotiated and coordinated props and equipment throughout Eastern Europe for a year on behalf of the director. In his opinion, the problem was not that Jancsó was not interested in it, but rather that he realised that the task was much larger in scope than his previous works, even larger than the film *Csillagosok* which had been made in Soviet co-production.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>42</sup> Két évtizede, *Kisalföld*, 1992. 12. 09. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Marx, József: *Jancsó Miklós élete és kora*, Budapest, Vince Kiadó, 2015, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, József: *Jancsó Miklós két és több élete*, Budapest, Vince Kiadó, 2000, 259-260.

<sup>45</sup> Szekfű, András *Ibid.* 2021, 276-277.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, József: *Hernádi Gyula és a film*, Budapest, Kortárs Kiadó, 2007, 158.

<sup>47</sup> Szekfű, András *Ibid.* 2021, 214.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 217.

An important difference is that Wajda's creative team would have allowed much greater freedom during the shooting than the Soviets did. In this regard, it is worth noting that Jancsó had already annoyed the leaders of the Soviet troops stationed in Hungary with the films *Szegénylegények* (1966) and *Így jöttem* (My Way Home, 1965), as in the former one the story of a Russian general who lived during the Stalin era was recognizable,<sup>49</sup> while in the latter, the Soviet liberators were not clearly liberators. Then they were also disappointed by the depiction of the Reds and the Whites in *Csillagosok*, and Jancsó's filming methods, such as using fewer actors than usual and filming at a pace that was considered too fast, superficial, and difficult to control, did not win the approval of the management of Mosfilm.<sup>50</sup> No wonder the filmmakers were not allowed to attend the gala premiere in Moscow.<sup>51</sup>

Returning to *Csatadal*: according to a strange anecdote, Wajda and his team would have cast even more cannons for the film, but Jancsó had a problem with this, as he wanted cannons like Bem had: allegedly, the horses were not pulled away even under cannon fire. The Poles were unwilling to do this, and in the end, the film project was abandoned: *'Who finally said no? Nobody. How did it end? The way it usually ends, saying that next week we don't have to go. That's how.'*



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As Grunwalsky put it about the finances: *'it was a horrible amount', 'it cost as much as Ben-Hur, and at that time it wasn't possible to do anything digitally'*. In his opinion, even if Jancsó had seriously undertaken the project, they would not have been able to do it due to the demands that had emerged and the time that should have been invested: *'Miki was already past the point of spending so much on a film'*.<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, it is practically impossible to find Hungarian budget figures concerning filmmaking in the Kádár era – and generally relating to the film industry of the countries of the Eastern Bloc – so it is impossible to compare, for example, the money spent on producing *Egri csillagok* (Stars of Eger, 1968, Zoltán Várkonyi) and other Hungarian historical

costume dramas with the average budget for Hungarian, Polish, or Soviet films. Wajda mentions a budgeted amount of 40 million zlotys at the exchange rate of the time, which seems like a lot, but according to the director's explanation, they became profitable thanks to huge ticket sales at Polish cinemas and foreign distribution of films.<sup>53</sup> For example, the budget for the most-watched Polish film to date, *Keresztesek* (The Knights of the Teutonic Order; *Krzyżacy*, 1960, Aleksander Ford), was also around 40 million zloty<sup>54</sup>, and by 2000 it had been seen by approximately 33 million people in Poland alone.<sup>55</sup> Researching and analysing the budget data of Hungarian films could be a huge task.

<sup>49</sup> Mihancsik, Zsófia: Áltörténelmi filmjeim. Beszélgetés Jancsó Miklóssal. *Filmvilág*, 2000/1, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Nemeskürty, István: *Mi végre vagyok a világon*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005, 202. For more on the shooting, see: *Szovjet-magyar koprodukció – Dokumentumfilm a Csillagosok katonák születéséről* (Forgács, Iván, Kodolányi, Sebestyén, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdqKF-xdwA4> (Last download: 11 June 2024.)

<sup>51</sup> *Magyar filmek 1896–2021... Ibid.* 2012, 275–276.

<sup>52</sup> Szekfű, András *Ibid.* 2021, 275–277.

<sup>53</sup> Wajda, Andrzej: *A film és más hívságok*, Budapest, Osiris, 2002, 130.

<sup>54</sup> Fenyves, György: Lengyel ezeregyéjszaka, *Filmvilág*, 1965/14, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Haltof, Marek: *Historical Dictionary of Polish Cinema*, Lanham – Toronto – Plymouth, The Scarecrow Press, 2007, 2.

In my opinion, any of the reasons listed above could have led to the fact that *Csatadal* was never completed. Jancsó's demands concerning shooting equipments could not win the Polish partner's approval, and the director himself did not want to spend too much time on the production – he apparently preferred quick shootings until the end of his career – the resulting protracted negotiations, the presumably high cost of making the film, or the presumed mention of Pasha Murad did not help the realisation of the film either.

Although among historians the question 'what could have been, if' sounds controversial, but still, what kind of film could *Csatadal* have been? Based on Jancsó's previous productions, there would have been a strong emphasis on long shots; complex, planned camera movements (e.g., "framing" a character by circling around them); and carefully rehearsed choreography between characters (movements between the manipulator and the oppressed: the former stands and commands the latter, or the former walks around the latter).<sup>56</sup> In addition, carefully choreographed crowd scenes would have definitely featured, such as the running of the Red prisoners in the barracks occupied by the Whites in *Csillagosok*, or the Reds rushing into the Whites' volley of fire at the end of the film; or the joint

dance of soldiers and peasants in *Még kér a nép*, which turns into a mass murder committed by soldiers after the appearance of the cavalry commanders. Based on the abstract, it would have been closer to a classic historical tableau, but it is certain that, taking his entire career into account – he did not step outside his modernist, authorial framework for the sake of midcult, as István Szabó did, for example<sup>57</sup> – *Csatadal* would have been a Jancsó film through and through.

Since it is difficult to provide specific data on the finances of *Csatadal*, it is perhaps easy to see what a large-scale movie it could have become compared to domestic productions, (not only) by Eastern European standards. It is certain that, strangely enough, until now no film or series dealing specifically with Bem's life and deeds has been made; so far, only a Polish musical has dealt with him,<sup>58</sup> and he appears in a television adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's work, *A világítótorony őre* (The Lighthouse Keeper, Latarnik).<sup>59</sup>

At this stage of his career, *Csatadal* would have been in a similarly exceptional position to *The Pacifist*, except that it would have stood out not because of its political involvement, but because it would have been closer to historical films. In my view, if it had to be compared to any of Jancsó's contemporary works, it would have been closer

to *Csillagosok*, which depicts the Russian Civil War between 1917 and 1922, than to the more general, parabolic, and, as a result of Jancsó's development, more poetic *Még kér a nép*, combining the details of historical periods in an arbitrary manner, making it more difficult for a wider audience to accept. In my opinion, *Csatadal* could have achieved similar success to Várkonyi's adaptations in the 1960s – if not as much, but it could certainly have been one of the most important Hungarian-Polish films of the 1970s.

<sup>56</sup> See: Vajna, Tamás: A ma 100 éve született Jancsó Miklós csodafegyvere: a hosszú snitt. <https://qubit.hu/2021/09/27/a-ma-100-eve-szuletett-jancso-miklos-csodafegyvere-a-hosszu-snitt>; Jancsó Miklós tömegkoreográfiái. <https://litera.hu/magazin/interju/jancso-miklos-tomegkoreografiai.html> (Last download: 1 August 2024.)

<sup>57</sup> In the 1980s he achieved great success with this: *Mephisto* (1981) of his Europe-trilogy starring Klaus-Maria Brandauer received among others the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, while *Colonel Redl* (1985) and *Hanussen* (1988) were nominated. See: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082736/awards?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082736/awards?ref=tt_awd), [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089716/awards?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089716/awards?ref=tt_awd), [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095276/awards?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095276/awards?ref=tt_awd). (Last download: 11 June 2024.)

<sup>58</sup> See: Bem! Powrót Człowieka-Armaty. (Michał Walczak, 2018.) <https://www.ebilet.pl/teatr/musical/bem-musical-o-patriotach-i-renegatach>; <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/przedstawienie/71527/bem-powrot-czlowieka-armaty> (Last download: 21 May 2024.)

<sup>59</sup> See: *Latarnik* (1977) [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3429174?ref=tt\\_ch](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3429174?ref=tt_ch) (Last download: 1 August 2024.)

Barnabás Pálinkás

# The Precursors of the Tusványos Camp<sup>1</sup>



On 21 July 1990, the first Bálványos Summer Free University – which has now become one of the greatest festivals and public events of Transylvania – opened its gates under the motto ‘Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy’. At the beginning, the free university and student camp was very small in scale: according to the recollections of attendees, there were hardly more than 60 participants, and following the regime change it was organized with the optimistic intention of providing a forum for self-education and dialogue between Hungarians, as well as to help normalize Hungarian–Romanian relations. The intentions of the founders and the organizers presumably did not change, but it soon turned out that dialogue between the

Central European nations was by no means so simple. As the number of participants increased, the camp outgrew its original location, and became one of the main meeting places and forums of national politics for Hungarians living either in Hungary or beyond the borders. Viktor Orbán,<sup>2</sup> who has attended the camp almost every year since its inception, irrespective of whether he was ‘only’ party president or prime minister of Hungary in office at the time, besides talking about current issues of domestic, foreign, or neighbourhood policy in his closing address, always covers ideological questions that concern him, which often spark serious international debate and controversy.

This study focuses on the establishment of the free university and its precursors.

The idea of the meeting was conceived in December 1989 in Târgu Secuiesc (Kézdivásárhely), where Zsolt Németh<sup>3</sup> from Hungary, representing FIDESZ (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége [Alliance of Young Democrats]), formed around a year earlier; his friend, doctor Miklós Szabó;<sup>4</sup> a young English journalist David Campanale,<sup>5</sup> who was travelling with them, and who was an elected Social Democrat local politician from London; and local young people talked late into the night about what should and could be done in the new situation, a few days after the outbreak of the Romanian Revolution. Beyond the idea of the organization of a free

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this study was published in Hungarian: Pálinkás, Barnabás: Szabadegyetem a fenyőfák alatt. A ‘tusványosi folyamat’ előzményei. *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, No. 1-2, 2023, 148–154. I would like to thank David Campanale and Csongor Jánosi for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Orbán, Viktor (1963–): lawyer, politician, one of the founders of the FIDESZ [Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – Alliance of Young Democrats]. Prime minister of Hungary between 1998 and 2002 and from 2010 to the present.

<sup>3</sup> Németh, Zsolt (1963–): economist and politician. He graduated from the University of Economics in Budapest (then Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences). During his academic years he was the member of the Rajk László College for Advanced Studies and the founder of Széchenyi István College for Advanced Studies. Between 1988 and 1989 he studied at Oxford on the Soros scholarship. Between 1987 and 1990 he worked in the Research Institute for Hungarian Studies. He was a founder of FIDESZ, and since 1990 he has been a member of Parliament for the party. Between 1998–2002, then 2010 and 2014 he was under-secretary of state of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the founders of the Bálványos Summer Free University, honorary chief steward of the Transylvanian Assembly, and vice chairman of the Rákóczi Association.

<sup>4</sup> Szabó, Miklós (1964–): neonatologist. He graduated from Semmelweis University in 1988 with a degree in general medicine. He worked in the Municipal Hospital in Sopron, and at the Ambulance Service of the Peter Cerny Foundation. At present he is the Head of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Semmelweis University’s First Department of Paediatrics, a professor at Semmelweis Medical University, and the Head of the Neonatology Department.

<sup>5</sup> Campanale, David (1963–): British journalist. He worked in Hungary and Transylvania as a journalist who working for a Channel 4 politics programme in London and an activist for the Young Social & Liberal Democrats from England. The foundation of the Bálványos Free University was partly his idea. According to his recollections, following his initial liberal democratic attitude, by this time he was committed to the Christian Democratic ideology. See: Dénes, Ida: ‘Forradalomból született szellemi tábor’. *Erdélyi Napló*, 28 July 2014. <https://erdelyinaplo.ro/aktualis/osszeallitasok/forradalombol-szuletett-szellemi-tabor> (accessed: 5 November 2025.)

university,<sup>6</sup> the result of these intense days was the signature of a four-point statement<sup>7</sup> in which the signatories – the representatives of the Young Social & Liberal Democrats from England, FIDESZ, and the Kézdivásárhely organization of the Hungarian Democratic Youth Alliance in Romania, who were later the organizers of the Bálványos meeting – made a commitment to European unification, the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, human rights, as well as the development of market economy and parliamentary democracy-based systems. In the following, we will attempt to analyse the major stages leading to ‘the Bálványos or Tusványos process’<sup>8</sup> that is, which patterns, precursors, and personal ties of the organizers resulted in the foundation of a free university,

which also had an impact on the development of post-1989 Hungarian politics.

### PRECURSORS AND ANTECEDENTS

If we are looking for the historical roots of the Bálványos camp and free university, we have to go back as far as the Hungarian youth who had been forced to live beyond Hungary’s borders and who had sought an ideological path between the two world wars – not least with their myth-making camps – and especially the community-building of the Hungarian youth in Czechoslovakia and the meetings of young Hungarians in Transylvania. The Hungarian youth in Czechoslovakia who came of age after Trianon, did not study in Hungarian, and no longer attended university in Budapest,

but in Bratislava, Brno and Prague, formed self-organizing cultural groups<sup>9</sup> such as the meetings and camps organized by the Szent György Kör [Saint George Circle] in Prague,<sup>10</sup> the Sarló [Sickle] Movement growing out of the former,<sup>11</sup> and the Prohászka Circles,<sup>12</sup> which were also formed from scout groups in Prague, and were the first precursors of the Tusványos process. As we shall see, the organizers of Bálványos regarded them as models.

In August 1928, Hungarian scouts from Czechoslovakia camped in Gombasek (Gombaszög) near Rožňava (Rozsnyó), where besides reconsidering the traditions of nature and village research movements, they also laid the foundations for the Sarló Movement.<sup>13</sup> The ‘Gombaszög myth’ has its roots

<sup>6</sup> David Campanale recalled the events as follows: ‘After the meeting we went to a restaurant for dinner to continue our conversation there. Later we went to a small party where we drafted our declaration, which we published as well. It was during these meetings that I brought up the idea of a summer university as a possibility which could bring young people from Hungary, Romania, and Western Europe together, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. I was inspired by the Christian youth festival in Great-Britain called Greenbelt where I had taken part (...) The festival is a mixture of conversations about politics and justice from a Christian point of view, but it is also characterized by very good music and a lot of humour. I think the similarities with Tusványos are obvious’. Quoted by: Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Európa Fiatalfiai!’ A Fialat Szociál-Liberális Demokraták, a Fidesz és a MADISZ nyilatkozata. (Kézdivásárhely, 1989. december 31.) (Young People of Europe! Declaration of the Young Social & Liberal Democrats, the Alliance of Young Democrats and the Hungarian Democratic Youth Alliance. [Târgu Secuiesc, 31 December 1989.]) Published by: Bozóki, András (ed.): *Tiszta lappal. A FIDESZ a magyar politikában, 1988–1991*. Budapest, Fidesz, 1992, 231.

<sup>8</sup> By 1997 the participants had outgrown the original location in Bálványosfürdő (Băile Balványos), and the free university moved to Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad) – this is where the name of the event ‘Tusványos’ comes from, combining the names of the two settlements in a lighthearted way. The concept of the ‘Bálványos process’ first appeared perhaps in a report by one of the organizers, András Klein, concerning the camp in 1995: ‘The question arises at once, whether the dialogue developed here could be an alternative to the current official Romanian-Hungarian intergovernmental policy. If we would like to approach the issue symbolically, it should be noted that it was just at the time of the free university that the journey of László Kovács to Bucharest failed. One should certainly not draw far-reaching conclusions from this, but it can be stated that in Bálványos, although without the responsibilities of governance, more tangible results could be achieved. Although we are still far from a final and realistic alternative, the Bálványos process can help in its development. [...] A sincere dialogue has started at an opposition level. However, whether there will be tangible results depends on whether the processes similar to those in Bálványos will be able to influence political life and whether a political class committed to democracy could be developed. Klein, András: ‘VI. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem’. *Pro Minoritate*, No. 2. 1995, 12–13.

<sup>9</sup> For more details, see: Bajcsi, Ildikó: ‘Ideológiai választak a két világháború közötti csehszlovákiai magyar ifjúság körében’. *Per Aspera ad Astra*, No. 1. 2020, 7–25; and Bajcsi, Ildikó: *Kisebbségi magyar küldetés Csehszlovákiában. A sarlós nemzedék közösségi szerepvállalása Trianon után*. Budapest, L’Harmattan, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Szent György Kör [Saint George Circle]: A self-organizing group of Hungarian scouts who were university and college students in Prague in the 1920s and 1930s. After their camp held in Gombaszög in 1928, some of its radical members formed the Sarló [Sickle] movement,

<sup>11</sup> Sarló [Sickle] Movement: A left-wing Hungarian youth movement active between the two world wars in Czechoslovakia, formed partly from the radical members of the village research movement of the Saint George Circle in Prague and partly from the intellectual circle around the journal *A Mi Lapunk* [Our Journal] published in Lučenec (Losonc). At their Congress in Bratislava in 1931, at the urging and insistence of Edgár Balogh, who had a leading role in the movement, the Sarló was merged into the Communist Party, but following this the movement was divided and it gradually disintegrated.

<sup>12</sup> Prohászka Circles: Between the two world wars it was a Catholic religious and cultural organization for Hungarian university and college students in Czechoslovakia. Its founders were partly those members of the Saint George Circle who could not identify with the left-wing views of the Sarló movement which had been initiated at the Gombaszög camp. They published their journal *Új Élet* (New Life) in Košice (Kassa) (1932–1941) then in Budapest (1942–1944).

<sup>13</sup> The Gombaszög camp represents a historic point in the development of Hungarian youth in Czechoslovakia. The foundations of the folk-based Hungarian scout movement were laid by college students during the ten-day camp in the Sajó Valley, that is: ‘Hungarian youth in minority could become healthy workers in the universal democracy of the progressive age, drawing force from the land

here: later the CSEMADOK (Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kultúregyesülete [Cultural Association of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia])<sup>14</sup> held its central events here from the 1960s, then after the regime change, following several detours, the Gombaszög Summer Camp became the most important meeting place for young people and university clubs with Slovakian ties, organized by the Diákhálózat [Student Network]<sup>15</sup> and Sine Metu Civil Association.<sup>16</sup>



Viktor Orbán, founder of FIDESZ, later Prime Minister, and political scientist András Körösi at the 1st Bálványos Summer Free University (1990). Photo: Fortepan / Tamás Szűcs, 196688

The Ady Endre Diákkör [Ady Endre Student Circle] of the Hungarian university students studying in Prague organized meetings for university clubs under the name *Summer Youth Camp* in Kružná (Berzétékőrös) in 1956, then every year until 1972, always at a different location: Oborín (Abara), Pinciná (Pinc), Kameničná (Keszegfalva), Kamenín (Kéménd), Kapušianske Kľačany (Kaposkelecsény), Hrušov (Körtvélyes), and Jasov (Jászó). In

the mid-1970s, the Czechoslovak Communist authorities tried to make the self-organizing camps of the Hungarian youth administratively impossible.<sup>17</sup> In response, the still existing Local History Bicycle Tours were organized in 1975,<sup>18</sup> which, being mobile camps, could overcome legal restrictions.<sup>19</sup> From 1977, the youth camps were relaunched

under the name *Summer Cultural Camp* in Nová Stráž (Örsújfalu) (later at different locations), and at the same time district camps were also launched, which likewise helped the self-organization of the youth.

The local history and self-organizing groups<sup>20</sup> of the Hungarian youth in

and the village'. It was in Gombaszög that the Saint George Circle was transformed into the *Sarló* movement, while *Vetés* [Sowing – a periodical publication of the movement] was initiated there and the essence of the movement unfolded there in a clearer picture.' Szalatnai, Rezső: 'Új arcú magyarok'. *Korunk*, No. 12. 1929, [875–881] 877.

<sup>14</sup> Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kultúregyesülete (CSEMADOK) [Cultural Association of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia]: A cultural organization established in March 1949 after years of exile. After initial strong party control, it began to increase its scope of activity in the 1960s and to fulfil its task of promoting Hungarian culture by organizing numerous national events. From 1957, the 'national song and dance festival' was organized in Zselíz and then in Gombaszög. In 1968, it became the Cultural Association of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia, in 1990 the Democratic Association of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia, and in 1993 Csemadok – the Association of Hungarians in Slovakia for Social and Cultural Affairs. Today it is still one of the most important Hungarian social organizations in Slovakia.

<sup>15</sup> The Diákhálózat [Student Network], founded in 1990, is a cultural and interest umbrella organization for Hungarian university students living in Slovakia and studying in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

<sup>16</sup> Sine Metu Civil Association: An organization founded in 2010. Initially its major task was to organize the Gombaszög Summer Camp. In 2011 the Bilingual Southern Slovakia Movement was established on the organization's initiative, but they also consider it an important task to search for and save the destroyed or doomed Hungarian monuments in Slovakia.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Ady Endre Diákkör [Ady Endre Student Circle] called on college clubs on 15 March 1975, in which, referring to the idea of "Only from pure sources", they expressed the view that young people need to learn about their ethnic culture and to do something about it. The camp would have been organized at the recommended location in Topoľníky (Nyárasd), with the support of the Unified Agricultural Cooperative. A similar letter including the necessary ideological justification was sent to the District Institute of Public Education in Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely). In return for the support of the Unified Agricultural Cooperative, 20 campers would have worked for two weeks at the cooperative during the summer harvest. It seemed that the effort would lead to success, when Lajos Presinyszky, Chairman of the preparatory committee in Dunajská Streda, informed the organizers that the camp could not be held because of the high water levels and for hygienic reasons. The reality, naturally, was slightly different. The district chairman of the Socialist Youth Alliance was summoned by the officials of the Central Committee of the Socialist Youth Alliance and was ordered to cancel the event.' See: Puntigán, József: *Honismereti kerékpártúrák 1975–1994*. Dunaszerdahely, Lilium Aurum, 1995, 11–12.

<sup>18</sup> The first trip led by László Merva was organized by the Ady Endre Diákkör between 8 and 12 August 1975 between Jahodná (Pozsonyepérs) and Mužla (Muzsla), to make it possible for all young people interested to attend, whether they started from Prague or from the eastern regions. Report on the camp: Molnár, László: *Kerékpár, sátor és... Új Ifjúság*, 9. September 1975. 2.

<sup>19</sup> 'The lawyer Rezső Szabó gave us the brilliant idea to move the group to a new campsite every two days, as in this way we could circumvent the strict restrictions of the time.' Iboš 2019.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the Hungarian club movement in Czechoslovakia, see: Czabóczy, Szabolcs: *Kék a sátram, recece... Fejezetek a csehszlovákiai magyar ifjúsági klubmozgalom történetéből (1948–1992)*. Pozsony, Phoenix Library, 2021

Czechoslovakia and their summer meetings had a strong impact on young people in Hungary. Moreover, Hungarian speakers regularly participated in the events of the club movement. Young people critical of the system joined the Local History Bicycle Tours,<sup>21</sup> and many of them appeared in the camps of the Hungarian club movement in Czechoslovakia. The head of the Rakpart [Quay] Club,<sup>22</sup> Mihály Horváth<sup>23</sup> had a fatal motorcycle accident during the Abroncsos Cultural Camp in 1988. Some of the founders of the Rákóczi Association – including Miklós Czenthe,<sup>24</sup> András Simén,<sup>25</sup> and György Balázs<sup>26</sup> – were active

participants in and organizers of the bicycle movement from the very first camps, and at Sándor Lezsák's initiative young people from Lakitelek also joined the tours.<sup>27</sup> Zsolt Németh already rode a bike with the people from Czechoslovakia after taking his final exam, then participated in the summer youth camps.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in 1992 – already as a Member of Parliament – he met his future wife at a camp in Nová Stráž (Örsújfalu).<sup>29</sup> The experiences and models gained here are reflected in the idea of the Bálványos Camp,<sup>30</sup> all the more so since Mária Tárnok,<sup>31</sup> later chief organizer of Tuszányos

in Hungary and chair of the board of trustees of the Pro Minoritate Foundation for Minorities, was also an active participant in the Hungarian youth club movement and summer camps in Czechoslovakia as a resident of Štúrovo (Párkány), and has been attending the free university since 1992.<sup>32</sup>

If we attempt to unravel the local – i. e. Transylvanian – intellectual roots of the free university, we should have to go back to the Vásárhely Meeting<sup>33</sup> in 1937, but the community-building and organizational initiatives of the Christian youth and spiritual

<sup>21</sup> At the third trip in 1977, besides young people from Czechoslovakia, there were also guests from Budapest, Szeged and even Transylvania, and at the evening campfire, participants could listen, among others, to the lectures of historian Kálmán Benda and writer István János. See: Molnár, László: 'Honismereti kerékpártúra Gömörben'. *Honismeret*, No. 1. 1978, 12–13.

<sup>22</sup> Rakpart [Quay] Club: A defining institution of the 1980s, and perhaps the most regime-critical club of the club movement, which was formed in 1982, at 24 Belgrád Quay. Although it was established within the framework of the National Peace Council, it was not provided any support after 1984. In 1986, as a result of the lectures on the Revolution of 1956 in December 1985 (by Miklós Szabó) and on the democratic political reforms (by Mihály Bihari), its operation was suspended, and it could begin again only in 1988. In the course of the debates, issues concerning economic and political reforms as well as the situation of national minorities beyond the border often arose.

<sup>23</sup> Horváth, Mihály (1953–1988): He graduated from Eötvös Loránd University, with a degree in history and public education. From 1982 he was the founder and leader of the Rakpart Club, organizing lectures critical of the regime, and from 1985 he was the secretary of the Club Council. In 1986, following the suspension of the operation of the Rakpart Club, he was the organizer of the short-lived Citromos Teaház [Lemon Tea House]. In 1988 he was the spokesman for the Szabad Kezdeményezések Hálózata [Network of Free Initiatives].

<sup>24</sup> Czenthe, Miklós (1964–): historian and archivist. He graduated from the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University, with a degree in history and archival science. Alongside his university studies, he was involved in the organization of the Rákóczi Association, and after its foundation, he worked as an organizing secretary. At present he is senior staff member of the Lutheran Central Archives, and his main field of research is the history of the Szepesség (Szepes County).

<sup>25</sup> Simén, András (1947–2023): engineer and physicist. In 1977 he was among the first participants of the Local History Bicycle Tours in Slovakia coming from Hungary. He was one of the organizers of the tours from Hungary for many years. He took part in the foundation of the Rákóczi Association, and went on to be the secretary of the organization for many years.

<sup>26</sup> Balázs, György (1951–): ethnographer. He graduated from Kossuth Lajos University in Debrecen, with a degree in ethnography and geography. He worked in the Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum (Hungarian Open Air Museum) in Szentendre, then in the Agricultural Museum, and between 1999 and 2010 he was deputy director general of the Museum of Ethnography. His main field of research is the technical history of traditional mills. He participated in the organization of the bicycle tours in Czechoslovakia and the foundation of the Rákóczi Association, where he was actively involved in community service until the 2010s.

<sup>27</sup> In the autumn of 1973, Sándor Lezsák, as a student of Hungarian and history, gave a lecture at the Fábry Club in Košice about the folk customs along the Tisza River, then a few weeks later he participated in the meeting of the representatives of the Hungarian youth clubs in Czechoslovakia, again in Košice. See: Czáboczy, *Kék a sátram, recece...* 2021, 139–140. For the Local History Bicycle Tour organized in 1977 people from Lakitelek also arrived, according to the recollections of one of the main organizers, László Mihályi Molnár, this time 'Sanyi Lezsák sent Kálmán Tábori from Lakitelek in his place'. See: Puntigán, *Honismereti kerékpártúrák...* 1995, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Czáboczy, *Kék a sátram, recece...* 2021, 180–181.

<sup>29</sup> Nagymihály, Zoltán – Pálincás, Barnabás: 'Szárszó '88 volt a magyar rendszerváltás no return point-ja'. Németh Zsolt családi háttéréről, a klubmozgalomról és a 'rendszerváltó' nyári táborokról. *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, No. 1-2. 2022, [158–167] 165.

<sup>30</sup> In an interview, Zsolt Németh spoke about this quite specifically: '(...) the idea of the Bálványos Camp came up on the night of 29 and 30 December, which evidently cannot be separated from the camp culture that had already existed in Czechoslovakia. The idea that the dialogue and future-building between Hungarian and Romanian youth could be initiated in Transylvania within such a framework is related to the traditions of the Hungarian Minority Community in Czechoslovakia'. See: Nagymihály – Pálincás, Szárszó '88 volt... 2022, 165.

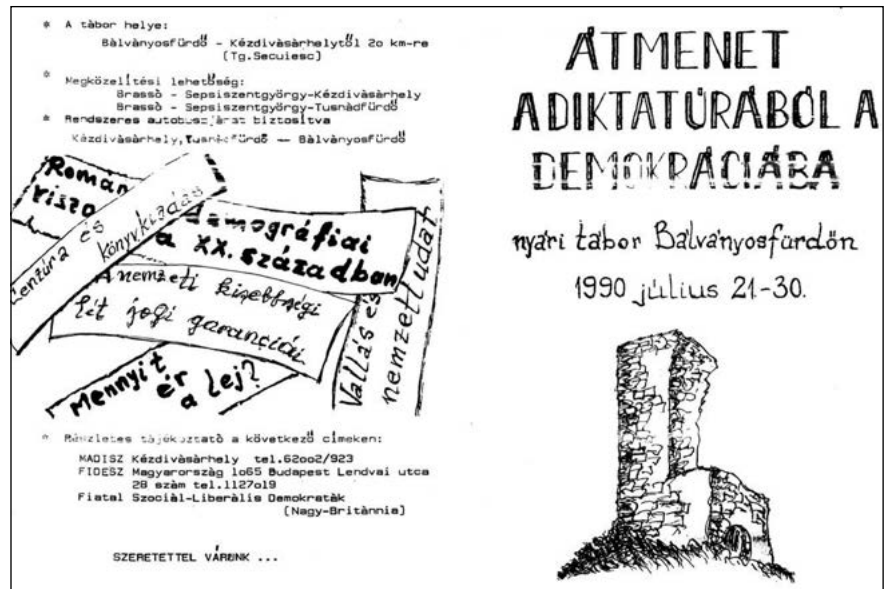
<sup>31</sup> Tárnok, Mária (1972–): programme organizer. She graduated from ELTE BTK with a degree in Czech literature and linguistics, and also studied political science at the Faculty of Law. Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees of A Kisebbségéért – Pro Minoritate Alapítvány [For Minorities – Pro Minoritate Foundation].

<sup>32</sup> See: *Tuszányos 30*. Documentary film, 2019, Directed by: Debreceni, K. Mihály and Lapedus-Sisko, Péter

<sup>33</sup> The representatives of the various Hungarian youth organizations in Transylvania met between 2-4 October 1937 in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely) to make an attempt to resolve differences in ideology and attitude amid the rise of Romanian state nationalism and to create an active unity, stating that 'each member of the Hungarian community in Transylvania has to take an interest in our fate and struggles and to actively serve and work for it'. See: Dávid, Gyula: A Vásárhelyi Találkozó. *Látó*, No. 4. 2010, 74–80.

movements are also important precursors, and, similarly to the Hungarian communities in Czechoslovakia between the two world wars, scouting as well.<sup>34</sup> Following the short period of Hungarian rule after the Second Vienna Award, the self-organizing and youth organization initiatives of Hungarian people became impossible, so during the communist dictatorship, particularly during the Ceaușescu-regime, the organization of young people beyond the party structure – and in particular national community-building – was unimaginable. Under persecution it could live on at most as an underground stream.<sup>35</sup>

Due to the connections of the founders and organizers to them, with regard to models and traditions in Hungary, we should mention the activities of the Christian youth movements and scouting between the two world wars, as such a significant precursor as the Szárszó meeting in 1943 had its venue provided by the Soli Deo Gloria Association of Hungarian Reformed Students.<sup>36</sup> After the Second World War, the communist dictatorship sought to eliminate all initiatives which were independent of the regime,



Invitation to the 1st Bálványos Summer Free University (1990). Photo: A Kisebbségekért – Pro Minoritate Alapítvány [For Minorities – Pro Minoritate Foundation] <https://prominoritate.hu/rendezvenyek/balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktabor/balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-1990/>

especially the associations, movements, and religious communities which were active in the field of youth education. After the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence in 1956 and the retaliation that followed, the state party led by János Kádár chose a more sophisticated means of exercising power and treated 'dissidents' 'with a softer touch'.<sup>37</sup> From the beginning of the 1980s, the Hungarian club movement and the network of specialized colleges also held various events and programmes which were later to serve as models for the

organizers of Bálványos: young people critical of the regime discussed several important topics that had previously been silenced in the Quay Club, the EF-Lapok and in the protected forums of the specialized colleges. The event known as 'Meeting IV of Specialized Colleges',<sup>38</sup> organized practically parallel to the Monor Meeting, was in fact the first such youth summer camp, where, similarly to Monor, the situation of the Hungarians living as minorities in neighbouring countries<sup>39</sup> was also on the agenda, and Zsolt Németh was the coordinator of

<sup>34</sup> For more on this issue, see the publication *Magyar cserkészélet (1910–1948)*, and in it the study of Csaba Bardócz on scouting in Transylvania. See: *Magyar cserkészélet (1910–1948)*. Tabajdi, Gábor – Szigeti, László ed. Budapest, Magyar Cserkészszövetség, 2020., and Bardócz, Csaba: 'Az erdélyi magyar cserkészlet története (1911–1944)'. In: *Magyar cserkészélet (1910–1948)*. Tabajdi Gábor – Szigeti László. ed. Budapest, Magyar Cserkészszövetség, 2020. 323–338

<sup>35</sup> On the Hungarian opposition movements in Transylvania that largely emerged in the early 1980s, and the activities of small intellectual groups, see Csongor Jánosi's recently published study: Jánosi, Csongor: 'Transylvanian Hungarian dissent in the 1980s. Forms of expression: samizdat, individual attitude, underground scientific circle'. *Betekintő* No. 4. 2022, 15–43., and for more on the issue see, among others: Novák, Csaba Zoltán: *Aranykorszak? A Ceaușescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája I. 1965–1974*. Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, Csíkszereda, 2011; Novák, Csaba Zoltán: *Holtvágányon. A Ceaușescu korszak magyarságpolitikája II. 1974–1989*. Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, Csíkszereda, 2017., and Buzogány, Dezső – Jánosi, Csongor: *A református egyház Romániában a kommunista rendszer első felében. Tanulmányok és dokumentumok*. Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the importance of Szárszó, see: Házi, Balázs – Nagymihály, Zoltán: 'A találkozók találkozója' A szárszói találkozó 1943-ban – és a rendszerváltás sodrában. *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, No. 1-2. 2022, 49–67.

<sup>37</sup> See: Székér, Nóra: 'A diktatúra "kis körei". Az aczéli kultúrpolitika néhány sajátossága'. In: *Forrásvidék. A nemzeti demokratikus gondolkodás a magyar folyóiratok tükrében, 1956–1987*. Nagymihály, Zoltán – Székér, Nóra. Ed. Lakitelek, Antológia Kiadó, 2017, 9–12.

<sup>38</sup> According to recollections, the aim was to divert the attention of the party headquarters, because if the organization of some event had already been approved three times, it would be easier to obtain permission for the fourth time. See: Nagymihály – Pálinkás, Szárszó '88 volt... 2022, 160–162.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the 'publicity' of the issue and the gradually increasing social interest in Hungary during the Kádár era, see Zoltán Nagymihály's study: Nagymihály, Zoltán: 'Áttörő szavak "a résnyre felhúzott zsiliipen". A határon túli magyarság kérdése az 1956 és 1987 közötti magyar sajtóvilágosságban'. In: *Forrásvidék. A nemzeti demokratikus gondolkodás a magyar folyóiratok tükrében (1956–1987)*. Nagymihály, Zoltán – Székér, Nóra ed. Lakitelek, Antológia Kiadó, 2017. 197–230.

this topic. Further camps of the specialized colleges, then the Szárszó Meeting in 1988, the meetings in Lakitelek, the work of the Research Group (from 1988 it was called Institute) for Hungarian Studies,<sup>40</sup> the aid campaigns in Transylvania,<sup>41</sup> the smuggling of Bibles and books,<sup>42</sup> the demonstration for Transylvania,<sup>43</sup> and the minority forums of the Hungarian Democratic Forum<sup>44</sup> were all such milestones leading up to the regime change, and, indirectly if not directly, influenced

and shaped the intellectual environment and friendships that helped to bring the Bálványos Free University to life.

### THE FIRST BÁLVÁNYOS

In response to news from Timișoara (Temesvár) in December 1989, at the beginning of the Romanian Revolution, on the evening of 18 December, opposition groups organized a solidarity demonstration at Heroes' Square in Budapest.

Here, confident in the victory of the revolution, Zsolt Németh welcomed the events with apprehensive joy and envisaged the possibility of reconciliation between Romanians and Hungarians.<sup>45</sup> Between 22 and 23 December, the journalist Zoltán Lovas<sup>46</sup> and Zsolt Németh were the first to visit László Tőkés<sup>47</sup>, who had been exiled to Mineu (Szilágymenyő), and they conveyed the greetings of worried Hungarians. After the ecumenical midnight service held at Heroes'

<sup>40</sup> The Research Group (from 1988 it was called Institute) for Hungarian Studies was established in 1985 under the leadership of Gyula Juhász within the National Széchényi Library. It continued the historical, ethnic, and bibliographical research conducted earlier by the Ethnic Research Group of the State Gorky Library. Its task was to organize complex research into the Hungarian community beyond the borders (as ethnic minorities or émigrés), as well as to prepare studies and, if necessary, background materials concerning issues of foreign policy. The Institute published its studies in the yearbook *Magyarságkutatás* [Hungarian Studies], but the researchers published their works in several Hungarian and foreign journals as well. They started the publication of a series of books entitled *A magyarságkutatás könyvtára* [The Library of Hungarian Studies], which included such books as the history of the University of Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), the history of Hungarians in Romania from 1918 to 1989, the history of the secondary school in Berehove (Beregszász) and a collection of documents related to minorities etc. The Institute was merged into the Teleki László Foundation in 1992. For more information, see: Nádor, Orsolya: 'A magyar mint idegen nyelv/hungarológia oktatásának történeti áttekintése a kezdetektől napjainkig'. In: *A magyar mint idegen nyelv. Hungarológia. Tankönyv és szöveggyűjtemény*. Giay, Béla – Nádor, Orsolya ed. Budapest, Osiris, 1998. 55–126.

<sup>41</sup> On this topic, see the recent publications by Bálint Ablonczy: Ablonczy, Bálint: 'Szolidaritás és ellenállás. Református hálózatok erdélyi segítőakciói a hetvenes-nyolcvanas években'. In: *Hagyomány, identitás, történelem 2019*. Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor ed. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Egyház és Társadalom Kutatóintézetének Reformáció Öröksége Műhelye, 2020. 313–332, and Ablonczy, Bálint: "'Tenni nemcsak valami ellenében – ám valamiért is lehet.'" Erdélyieket támogató illegális segélyszervezet a Kádár-rendszer végén'. In: *Hagyomány, identitás, történelem 2020*. Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor. ed. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Egyház és Társadalom Kutatóintézetének Reformáció Öröksége Műhelye, 2021. 385–400.

<sup>42</sup> 'In Romania during the period of Ceaușescu's dictatorship, being a Hungarian and a believer at the same time meant double discrimination and also minority status.' The religion-persecuting communist dictatorship sought to suppress all forms of free religious practice, including the publication and import of religious literature in the native language. The smuggling of church literature and Bibles in the Hungarian language can also be considered a form of cultural resistance. Kovács, Balázs: 'Egyházi irodalom a szörfdeszkán és a vízaknán át a hívekig. Keresztyén kötetek csempészése Erdélybe a ceaușescui diktatúra időszakában Balogh Barnabás közreműködése nyomán'. *Forrás*, No. 2, 2023, 37–51.

<sup>43</sup> On 27 June 1988, 80,000–100,000 people demonstrated peacefully at Heroes' Square in Budapest and in front of the Embassy of Romania in Budapest against the demolition of Hungarian villages in Transylvania and the anti-minority policy of the Ceaușescu regime. For more information, see: Szekér, Nóra: 'Átkelés a Rubiconon. Az Erdély-tüntetés 1988-ban'. *Rendszerváltó Archivum* No. 2. 2018, 4–13.

<sup>44</sup> On 6 and 21 March 1988, the Hungarian Democratic Forum held a forum and a debate on minority issues at the Jurta Theatre in Budapest. For more information, see: Nagymihály, Zoltán: "'Erdély minden előző lépésünkben benne volt'. A Magyar Demokrata Fórum két kisebbségi fóruma a Jurta Színházban 1988 márciusában'. In: *A felkészülés éve – 1988. A rendszerváltoztatást megelőző tanácskozások*. Szeredi, Pál ed. RETÖRKI Elektronikus könyvek 1. RETÖRKI, 2018. 86–112. <https://retorki.hu/kiadvanyok/a-felkeszules-eve-1988> (accessed: 5 November 2025.)

<sup>45</sup> Zsolt Németh's speech is published by: Bozóki, Tiszta lappal... 1992, 227–228.

<sup>46</sup> Lovas, Zoltán (1954–): journalist. In 1989 he worked for the independent video journal Fekete Doboz (Black Box), then as the national press officer for FIDESZ. Together with cameraman Zoltán Gál he sparked off the wiretapping scandal (Dunagate).

<sup>47</sup> In 2020, Zoltán Lovas recalled the search for László Tőkés as follows: 'In the midst of the Romanian Revolution, on 22 December 1989, the Alliance of Young Democrats sent me and Zsolt Németh, who was later undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, to Transylvania to find Tőkés, who then had been inaccessible for days. [...] We arrived at the bishop's brother, András in Temesvár on the same day. We also knew him, he trusted us, and together with him we set off for Menyő, where – as it turned out – Laci had been relocated by the Romanian authorities. We knocked at the door, but there was no answer. We knocked again, still there was no reply, then his brother shouted saying "It is me, András, come out at last, don't be such a coward!" Then he looked out asking "and what about the agents of the Securitate?" [...] We then rushed home with the recording, it was no joke, there were a lot of control points, and had we not had with us András Tőkés, who spoke Romanian perfectly, we wouldn't have got far, [...] But we reached the border, crossed at Vásárosnamény, entered the first police station [where they] got into a police Zsiguli and drove us to Pest with the sirens blaring. The film had immeasurable value, having Tőkés was as if one had found Petőfi alive after Segesvár. Even if there were unfortunately synchronization errors in the recording and only a small part of it could be used. Ádám Horváth, the television chief, liked it and put it in the news, and asked one of us to tell the Hungarian people in two minutes what exactly was going on outside. Zsolt Németh and I tossed a two-forint-coin – I swear it happened that way – I won, sat down and told it, and in the end I added that the next day, on 24 December at midnight, everybody who could should come to Heroes' Square to take part in an ecumenical mass for the victims of the Romanian revolution.' See: Nagy, József: 'Mi lett a rendszerváltás legnagyobb botrányának két főszereplőjével?' *24.hu*, 23 January 2020. <https://24.hu/kozelet/2020/01/23/dunagate-vegvari-jozsef-lovas-zoltan-titkosszolgalat/> (accessed: 5 November 2025.)

Square on Christmas Eve,<sup>48</sup> on the day of the execution of the Ceaușescu couple, Zolt Németh, Dr Miklós Szabó, and David Campanale arrived in Transylvania at the same time as the first aid shipments to acquaint themselves with the situation and to 'express the solidarity of Hungary and Great-Britain'. They contacted the Hungarian and Romanian youth organizations operating in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely), Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), and Târgu Secuiesc (Kézdivásárhely). As part of the tour, on 30 December, at the invitation of Attila Sántha,<sup>49</sup> Zolt Németh and David Campanale, in accordance with the mood, gave a truly uplifting lecture on the possibilities of Central European transformation at the Youth Club in Târgu Secuiesc (Kézdivásárhely).

The young English journalist, sharing his own experiences in Transylvania, encouraged local young people and drew their attention to the fact that the people of the fallen regime were trying to regain their power.<sup>50</sup> In his speech, Zolt Németh welcomed the foundation of the

Magyar Demokratikus Ifjúsági Szövetség (Hungarian Democratic Youth Alliance – MADISZ)<sup>51</sup> and the Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség (Romanian Hungarian Democratic Alliance – RMDSZ)<sup>52</sup>, conveyed the public sentiment in Hungary as well as a willingness to cooperate, and reassured them that everybody wanted to help the Hungarians in Romania. He pointed out to the young people in attendance that in order to implement radical changes, they would also have to take action, even if it meant arguing with their elders.<sup>53</sup>

The next day, MADISZ, the English Young Social & Liberal Democrats, and FIDESZ issued a joint declaration to the youth of Europe: 'Young People of Europe! We, the young democrats of Great Britain, Hungary, and Romania express our common ideas and aspirations. 1.) Europe is still divided. The unification of the continent is inconceivable without the Eastern and Central European region. Let us do everything to eliminate the remains of the Iron Curtain. 2.) We welcome the collapse of the communist regimes on the continent and

the emergence of systems based on market economy and parliamentary democracy. 3.) We believe in the establishment of human rights. We demand that the community rights of the religious and ethnic minorities be unconditionally guaranteed. 4.) We ask the nations, governments, and political organizations of the West to contribute by all means to the success of the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and to the peaceful and democratic transition.'<sup>54</sup>

Following this, in a revolutionary fervour, at a party bidding farewell to both the old year and the Ceaușescu regime, the idea of the summer camp arose.<sup>55</sup> The name of specific speakers came up during the planning stage, as Attila Kovács, organizer of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (MADISZ) in an interview in the journal *Székely Újság* (Székely Newspaper) in January said the following: 'In the course of July we are going to organize a political camp, where English, Hungarian, and Romanian speakers will give talks. From England for example, Norman Stone and György Schöpflin,

<sup>48</sup> 'My friends standing next to me, Zoltán Lovas and Zolt Németh, delivered the greetings from FIDESZ to László Tőkés the day before yesterday. They returned yesterday and brought the greetings of László Tőkés to the Hungarian people. They met László Tőkés in Szilágymező (correctly: Szilágymenyő), and this splinter, which they are now lighting as a symbolic candle, is from the small fence of the wooden church there. Let us remember.' The opening speech of Zoltán Rockenbauer at the ecumenical Christmas midnight service at Heroes' Square. Published by: Bozóki, Tiszta lappal... 1992, 230.

<sup>49</sup> Sántha, Attila (1968-): poet. Founder of the Bálványos Free University. From 1994 he was the founding editor of the journal *Előretolt Helyőrség*.

<sup>50</sup> See: Sántha, Attila: A történelem kereke visszafordíthatatlan ('Részletek David Campanale, az Angol Liberális Demokrata Párt képviselőjének beszédéből, amelyet 1989. december 30-án a kézdivásárhelyi Ifjúsági Klubban tartott'). *Székely Újság*, 13 January 1990, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Magyar Demokratikus Ifjúsági Szövetség [Hungarian Democratic Youth Alliance]: Hungarian youth organization founded at the time of the Romanian Revolution.

<sup>52</sup> Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség [Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania]: It was founded after the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship, on 25 December 1989 as the public representative and advocacy organization of the Hungarian community in Romania. The Alliance is the major community of the various interest and political organizations of the Hungarians in Romania, which, besides other smaller parties and organizations, provides the public and political representation of the Hungarian community at a national and local level. From 1990 they won election to Parliament at every election and could send representatives to both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Its presidents have been: Géza Domokos (1989–1993), Béla Markó (1993–2011) and Hunor Kelemen (2011–).

<sup>53</sup> Ambrus, Ágnes: 'Meg kell tanulnunk a morális politizálást. Részletek Németh Zolt, a FIDESZ képviselőjének beszédéből'. *Székely Újság*, 13. January 1990, 3.

<sup>54</sup> See: Bozóki, Tiszta lappal... 1992, 231.

<sup>55</sup> 'Barely a week after the outbreak of the revolution, while armed men guarded the studio apartment in Târgu Secuiesc (Kézdivásárhely), where representatives of youth organizations from three countries were crammed together, such an idea was conceived which would have seemed absurd not only earlier, but even a few months later.' See: Sántha, Attila: 'Európai horizontok felé. Jegyzetek egy nyári szabadegyetemről'. *Művelődés*, No. 8. 1990, 13–15., and see: Nagymihály – Pálkás, Szárszó '88 volt... 2022, 165.

professors at Oxford University, will come. In the evenings dance groups from the Hungarian-speaking area would provide entertainment. But for the time being, the most important thing is not to let the revolution fade away.<sup>56</sup>

Seven months after the conception of this idea – following ‘Black March’ in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely) and the parliamentary elections – the free university started in Bálványosfürdő with the motto *Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy*, with around sixty people<sup>57</sup> participating at the first event. The date of the first occasion was also symbolic, because it fell exactly at the time of the pilgrimage on St. Anne’s Day, which had been an important meeting opportunity for the opposition in Romania before the regime change.<sup>58</sup> Among the speakers at the camp were György Schöpflin, who was teaching in London, historian György Litván, literary historian Béla Pomogáts, economist László Lengyel, and

British historian Norman Stone, but the participation of some members of the Limes Circle – an intellectual group which was persecuted during the Ceauşescu era – including Sándor Balázs, Béla Bíró, Ernő Fábrián, Csaba Lőrincz, and Gusztáv Molnár – also had symbolic significance. The aim of the organizers was partly to start Romanian-Hungarian dialogue, as well as to enable young people to ‘learn’ and get accustomed with democracy and politics, not within the framework of current politics, but rather from a more universal approach of a different discipline each day: literature, history, sociology, economics, law, and political science. In this way they dealt with Transylvanianism,<sup>59</sup> the question of Central Europe, emigration and assimilation, the rule of law, minority rights, and the issues of the multi-party system. Romanian-Hungarian dialogue was facilitated by the presence of a Transylvanian civil organization, led by Smaranda Enache<sup>60</sup> and the Pro Európa Liga (Pro Europe League) based in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely).<sup>61</sup>

From the report of Tibor Toró T., we learn that the programme of the first free university included some less formal elements: The lectures were held in Hungarian, Romanian, and English, for six days, 3–4 hours a day, and the discussions often continued into the afternoon. Of course, we still had time to visit Saint Anne Lake, Bálványosvár, Búdös cave, or the mineral water beach, and in the evenings dance houses and rock music alternated. A special highlight of the days was the broadcast of the camp radio (Bálványosi Búdös). It was blasted especially in the mornings when it tried to wake up the participants who stayed up late until dawn talking and singing.<sup>62</sup>

The first camp was a sort of idol-breaker,<sup>63</sup> living up to the expectations and becoming a tradition. The only thing missing was the publication of the texts of the speeches, as the programme booklet promised that Századvég Publishing House would publish them, but in the end this did not happen. At the same time, as

<sup>56</sup> Sántha, Attila: ‘Ki kell ejtenünk: antikommunizmus’. Beszélgetés MADISZ-képviselőkkel. *Székel Újság*, 6 January 1990, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Zsolt Németh recalls a ‘camp in Bálványos with a small group of sixty people and a good atmosphere’. Others, such as Béla Pomogáts perceived the number of participants to be much greater: ‘at least 200 university students and young intellectuals gathered at the camp’. The correspondent of *Háromszék* also estimated the number of people taking part in the free university to be between 200–250 and noticed: ‘Most of them are Transylvanians, but at least 30 people are from Hungary and some of them came from Czechoslovakia and Transcarpathia as well. The numbers are not final, as one can still see hikers with metal frame backpacks every day heading towards Bálványosfürdő.’ See: Németh, Zsolt: ‘Tusnádi jubileumra’. *Pro Minoritate*, No. 2. 2009, 3–4.; Pomogáts, Béla: Bálványosi utazás. *Élet és Irodalom*, 10 August 1990, 4; Sylvester, Lajos: Bálványosi bálványdöntögetés. *Háromszék*, 28 July 1990, 1., 7.

<sup>58</sup> Löffler, Anna: ‘Bálványostól Tusványosig, avagy egy tábor, amely politikai folyamatá érett’. *Polgári Szemle*, No. 4. 2009. Online: [https://epa.oszk.hu/00800/00890/00041/EPA00890\\_Polgari\\_Szemle\\_345.html](https://epa.oszk.hu/00800/00890/00041/EPA00890_Polgari_Szemle_345.html) (accessed: 5 November 2025.)

<sup>59</sup> Transylvanianism from a political perspective is a political ideology aiming at the promotion of the interests of the Transylvanian region, while on a literary level it is a specific ‘Transylvanian idea’ seeking to enable the rapprochement and understanding between the peoples living together following the Treaty of Trianon. At the camp, Béla Pomogáts and Lajos Kántor (literary critic, essayist, and editor-in-chief of the journal *Korunk* [Our Age] in Kolozsvár) gave lectures on Transylvanianism.

<sup>60</sup> Enache, Smaranda (1950-): teacher and human rights activist. In December 1989 he founded the Pro Európa Liga (Pro Europe League), the first civil organization in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely), which set as its goal to raise awareness of democratic values. He was a regular participant at the Bálványos and Tusványos camps. Between 1998 and 2001 he was the ambassador of Romania to Finland.

<sup>61</sup> At the time of the camp in 1991, the Bálványos process also had a Romanian political partner, the Civil Alliance, among the co-organizers. See: Löffler, Bálványostól... 2009, and Löffler, Anna: A bálványosi-folyamat, avagy egy generáció a Kárpát-medencei magyar politikában. *Pro Minoritate*, No. 2. 2009, 9–25.

<sup>62</sup> Among contemporary reports – in addition to the account of Attila Sántha in the journal *Művelődés* [Culture] – this one provides the most complete compilation of the individual lectures. Toró T., Tibor: Átmenet a diktatúrából a demokráciába... *Temesvári Új Szó*. [Included: *Vétó. (A Temesvári Magyar Ifjúsági Szervezet Lapja)*]. 18 August 1990. III; and Sántha, Európai horizontok felé... 1990, 13–15.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Anticipating a future summary, we can now state that in Bálványosfürdő we are currently witnessing probably the most significant democratic intellectual self-coherence. How much we were worried about the generations to come after us, that they would be repressed, squeezed out, eliminated, written off [...] In Bálványosfürdő the breaking of idols and social taboos is underway, with such preparedness and willingness and let us believe with such an effect that, before long, will elevate the events that took place here to the heights of the lasting tales and legends of this famous venue.’ Sylvester, Bálványosi bálványdöntögetés... 1990, 7.

the informative brochure of the Central European and Minority Group of FIDESZ, which largely overlapped with the circle of camp organizers, the journal *Pro Minoritate* was published for the Bálványos camp in 1991, which was intended to be the 'journal of the minorities surviving across the borders'.

The initial optimism concerning the improvement of Hungarian–Romanian relations later went through several ups and downs. Already at the time of the second camp it was the organizers' experience that 'the peoples of Central Europe find it increasingly difficult to understand each other, but at the same time many people hope that the West will not only become a partner of Central European nations in the forthcoming years, but also a model for them, and a "mediator", an intermediary in their debates and cooperation.'<sup>64</sup> The free university and the issue of minorities motivated many people regardless of their party affiliation. However, from the very beginning, FIDESZ has clearly had a decisive role among the organizers as well.<sup>65</sup>

This study cannot undertake an analysis of the thirty-five-year-process of development, nor of the closing speeches by the prime minister/party leader referred to as 'Orbán concerts' in the festival's slang. However, it can be stated that the ideas that arose under the tents in Bálványos, and then in Tusnádfürdő, contributed to the formulation of the defining direction of the Hungarian policy of FIDESZ governments, thus the Hungarian Permanent Conference, the status law, cross-border reunification in the European Union, self-government and autonomy, regionalism, and the overall Hungarian development policy can all partly be connected to this.<sup>66</sup>

The initially 'small' group of campers, formed on an invitation-only basis, had outgrown the Bálványos location by 1997. The free university moved to Tusnádfürdő, and after the annual Transylvanian Student Camp in Homoródfürdő was discontinued in 1995, a more relaxed, festival-like atmosphere was incorporated into the event's programme. After the 30th camp in 2019, the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University

and Student Camp was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic, first being postponed until 2021,<sup>67</sup> and then, due to new waves of the pandemic, postponed again by another year, and it could only be held again between 19 and 24 July 2022. In the coming years, as has been the case every year since the camp began, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will close the camp with a speech. In his closing speeches, he has repeatedly expressed his opinions in a taboo-breaking manner, which has almost immediately sparked heated debates.<sup>68</sup> Over the past 35 years, Tusványos has evolved from a friendly camping trip and political 'self-education' event to one of the current government's most important national policy workshops, as well as a political meeting place and a true mass event.

<sup>64</sup> Németh, Zsolt: 'Napforduló után'. *Pro Minoritate*, No. 2-3, 1991, 8–9.

<sup>65</sup> After the Bálványos Camp in 1991, Zoltán Bretter, the reporter of *Beszélő* [Speaker] 'reproachfully' confronted Zsolt Németh with the fact that 'I haven't really seen any experts or participants from the SZDSZ (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége [Alliance of Free Democrats]), and especially no speakers.' In his response, Zsolt Németh spoke bitterly about the weakness of the Hungarian policy of the SZDSZ and at the same time predicted the future development of the camp's political direction: 'There is no consciousness in it. For the organization, our cooperation with the MISZSZ (Magyar Ifjúsági Szervezetek Szövetsége [Alliance of Hungarian Youth Organizations]) was sufficient. Concerning the idea that cross-border issues should be handled on a national basis, it has such a compulsive character, which we do not wish to undertake. I venture to say that the minority policy of the SZDSZ is on shaky ground. In the preparatory work related to the minority law, negotiations and the formulation of positions have started and Erika Törzsök, head of the minority group of the SZDSZ, has intensively participated in this process. At the same time we feel that the position of the Free Democrats is undecided. Nor do I feel that the Free Democrats would place an equal emphasis on minority questions both within and beyond the borders. This would be very important because it could easily lead to polarization, in which the MDF (Magyar Demokrata Fórum [Hungarian Democratic Forum]) and the governing parties would appropriate the minorities living abroad, while the Free Democrats would appropriate the domestic minorities. I think that this would neither be favourable to those living in Hungary, nor to those beyond the borders. Bretter, Zoltán: 'Interjú Németh Zsolttal: Folyosói beszélgetések helyett. Kisebbségekről és némely liberális pártokról'. *Beszélő*, 3 August 1991, 22

<sup>66</sup> Németh, Tusnádi jubileumra... 2009, 4.

<sup>67</sup> In 2021 the Summer Free University of the Carpathian Basin was organized at the camp of the Rákóczi Association in Sátoraljaújhegy, under the motto *Újraindítás-megújulás* [Restart-Renewal] as a kind of 'substitute for Tusványos'.

<sup>68</sup> Orbán's memorable speech from 2014 on 'illiberal democracy' and his controversial speech from 2022, in which he argued that 'we do not want to become a mixed-race people' caused such a stir in Romanian domestic politics that the Hungarian party (RMDSZ) was forced out of the Romanian coalition government. But he has also spoken repeatedly about the decline of the Western world, war and peace, 'world system change', 'national grand strategy', and 'digital conquest'. See.: Gazdag, Ferenc: *Három évtized magyar külpolitikája (1989–2018)*. Budapest, Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, 2021, 263–265., and Mihályi, Péter – Szelényi, Iván: 'Fajok? Etnicitás és rasszizmus'. *Mozgó Világ*, No. 10. 2022, 3–16.

Alemzhan Arinov – Edil Noyanov –  
Zhumakan Arynov

## Examining the Portrayal of Hungary in the Soviet Military Press, 1944–1945



Alemzhan Arinov

Propaganda played a significant role in Soviet society. In the Soviet Union, propaganda became a priority area of state policy. Scholars often refer to the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin as the world's first 'propaganda state,' characterized by ideology, propaganda, and mass indoctrination.<sup>1</sup>

Propaganda was designed to control the thinking and actions of the Soviet population.<sup>2</sup> One of the main tools of ideological control was the periodical press. In this context, the phenomenon of the Soviet newspaper emerged alongside the development of the administrative and command system. As a result, millions of copies of the party, Komsomol, and other publications proved to be a mass propaganda instrument.<sup>3</sup>

The military press is one aspect of this propaganda 'machine', illustrating both the overall challenges that propaganda faced and the specific problems confronting Soviet society. In particular, it highlights the experiences of the millions of

Soviets who traveled abroad during the war. Since the 2000s, much attention has focused on how the Red Army interacted with civilian populations in both liberated countries and in Germany and its allied states.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, this article examines the construction and promotion of an image of Hungary by the Soviet military press.

The Chief of the Political Directorate of the Red Army (Chief of PDRA) oversaw the content of the military press, particularly for daily oversight of the front newspapers. Front (the Red Army equivalent of Army Groups) and army political departments managed the army and divisional newspapers. Overall, the political departments and military press constituted a single propaganda body whose primary function was to influence the Red Army service members.

During combat operations in Hungary, German and Hungarian troops were presented as a unified enemy. Alongside vengeful slogans and appeals, the press also published accounts of

so-called 'acts of revenge', often featuring documentary evidence of Red Army soldiers vowing retribution. The main objective of this coverage was to cultivate hostility towards Hungarians within the Red Army. This intent is evident from the formulaic and impersonal use of the phrase 'revenge on the Magyars', which was primarily used as a slogan, emphasizing the central idea of revenge.

Revenge occurred in Hungary during this period. Scholars examined violence in Hungary and documented widespread assaults, robberies, and violent committed acts during the fighting.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet army regarded Hungary as an adversarial country.<sup>6</sup> Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry reported that the Red Army had significant difficulty communicating with locals due to language barriers, as few Hungarians spoke Russian. Soldiers were seldom granted leave, and the absence of field brothels contributed to incidences of rape. Red Army soldiers were permitted to send

<sup>1</sup> Peter Kenez: *The Birth of Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985; David Brandenberger: *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Karel C. Berkhoff: *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Irina Lysakova: *Vozdeĭstvie russkogo gazetnogo teksta na mentalitet lichnosti*. *Russian Language Journal*, 1995/162, 287.

<sup>4</sup> Antony Beevor: *The Fall of Berlin, 1945*. New York, Penguin Group, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah S. Cornelius: *Hungary in World War II. Caught in the Cauldron*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2011; Krisztián Ungváry: *Battle for Budapest*. New York, I.B. Tauris, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> James Mark: *Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and Red Army in Hungary 1944–1945*. *Past & Present*, 2005/1, 133.

home parcels weighing up to 10 kg, which incentivized theft and looting. Many individuals, including high-ranking officers, had directly or indirectly experienced the criminal acts committed by German and Hungarian troops in occupied areas and therefore often pursued acts of retribution.<sup>7</sup>

Senior Lieutenant Pavel Zolotov witnessed the violence. In his memoirs, originally written 'to the table', Zolotov mentions:

When you approach the front line, where only our troops have advanced, the picture of the barbaric pogrom in the apartments is observed in its original form. That is, untidy, destroyed apartments, and this situation was everywhere. What did the soldiers want, making such pogroms? Just a wristwatch and a pocket watch, that was all they needed. They threw everything out of their chests of drawers and cupboards because of the watch, and if they didn't find anything. They were even more angry, suspecting that the owners had hidden the watch carefully. And out of anger, they beat cans of tomatoes, jam, juice, etc. Wherever our troops appeared, young girls and young women disappeared. In the houses you see only old women, old men and children ... all carefully hidden.<sup>8</sup>

In places where the fighting was most prolonged, the suffering of the population was more severe. So, in the western part of the capital (Buda), in the area

of the Gellért Hill, almost all the houses were looted. Ferenc Kishont (Efraim Kishon), an Israeli humorist who lived in Budapest in 1945, recalled:

We expected the people who overcame the massive National Socialist war machine to be exceptional. But, the Soviet people we encountered were, instead, adept black market traders and enthusiastic ragamuffins, some even dragging baby strollers overflowing with spoils from their marauding campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

The actions of the soldiers were particularly painful for the local Communists. In the winter of 1945, Mátyás Rákosi<sup>10</sup> asked the leader of the Comintern, Georgy Dimitrov, to intervene in the fight against the rape of women. He did not get a response.<sup>11</sup> In February, the Hungarian communist Kobanja noted the following about Soviet soldiers:

For decades, workers around the world have looked at Moscow as an ignorant worker looks at Christ. It was from there that they expected to be freed from the barbaric vandalism of fascism. After long and painful persecutions, the glorious, long-awaited Red Army has arrived, but what a Red Army!<sup>12</sup>

Kobanja highlighted the mistreatment of Hungarian women and noted that many Communists struggled to understand the immoral behavior of Soviet soldiers.<sup>13</sup> He explained, 'We know that the

intelligent members of the army are communists, but when we seek their help, they respond with rage and threats, saying: What did you do in the Soviet Union? You not only raped our wives in front of our eyes but also killed them and their children, burned our villages, and destroyed our cities.' Kobanja acknowledged that Hungarian capitalism produced its own sadistic individuals, but questioned why the Siberian soldiers held such views.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the content of military newspapers contains materials with negative characteristics of Hungarians and calls for revenge on them. This is primarily evident through revenge propaganda, which is carried out by publishing articles detailing the excesses and crimes committed by Hungarian troops in the occupied territory of the Soviet Union. In particular, such propaganda is especially evident in articles describing the brutal policy of Hungarians in Voronezh and the surrounding region. The deputy editor of the newspaper of the 7th Guards Army *Za Rodinu* (For The Motherland), Major Boris Pagirev, most clearly demonstrates this approach:

Many of our warriors passed through villages occupied by the Magyars. Perhaps, among the soldiers reading these lines, there are natives of the Voronezh Region; you remember what the Magyars did in the villages they captured. Each of you will recall the suffering inflicted by the Magyars. Those who have

<sup>7</sup> Ungváry: *Ibid.* 2003, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Zolotov: *Zapiski minometchika. Boevoi put' sovetskogo ofitsera. 1942–1945.* Moscow, Tsentrpoligraf, 2007, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Ungváry: *Ibid.* 2003, 286.

<sup>10</sup> Mátyás Rákosi served as General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1948.

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius: *Ibid.* 2011, 377.

<sup>12</sup> Ungváry: *Ibid.* 2003, 287.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

not witnessed these acts, nor had relatives in Magyar captivity, should know the Magyars are capable of the same brutality as the Germans. The Magyar must face the same consequences as the German – death.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, publications accuse Hungarians of reprisals against wounded and captured Red Army soldiers. They present evidence of the 'brutal torture' of Soviet soldiers. For instance, 'The Magyars Did It' details the burning alive of Leonid Marchenko, a wounded machine gunner.<sup>16</sup> 'The Germans and Hungarians Did It' reports the mass bayoneting of sixteen captured Red Army soldiers and one captain.<sup>17</sup> All such articles end by calling readers to retaliate against the German-Hungarian perpetrators. Third, printed propaganda materials do not specify which Hungarians it is permissible to take revenge upon, unlike in the Bulgarian case, where propaganda clearly separated the civilian population from the pro-German government during the autumn and winter battles of 1944.

In addition, one of the catalysts of violence was the fact that the image of the 'Hungarian bourgeois' was promoted among the Red Army. The 'bourgeois' category included anyone who owned a clock, bed, or stove. Most Hungarians fell into this category, notes Deborah Cornelius.<sup>18</sup> Krisztián Ungváry, describing the case of violence against the

'bourgeois', quotes one of the victims of the robbery:

They were going to execute me as a 'bourgeois' who had a telephone and a radio and could speak German – I must have been spying for the Germans. My house was completely looted by the Russians.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the previously mentioned Pavel Zolotov illustrates an incident that happened to a Hungarian teacher. Having a wooden house with large windows, spacious rooms and household amenities, the teacher was mistaken for a 'bourgeois,' and his home was destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

In early 1945, the Soviet Information Bureau (*Sovinformburo*) published a report in newspapers describing how German forces murdered parliamentarians sent by the Soviet command with an ultimatum to the encircled enemy troops in Budapest to surrender. This marked a shift in the military press approach to the Hungarian case:

Avoid unnecessary bloodshed, save the civilian population of the enormous city from suffering and victims, and also prevent the destruction of the Hungarian capital and its historical values, cultural and artistic monuments. Hitler's command, having villainously killed Soviet parliamentarians, acts on the principle of 'after us at least a flood.' The Germans

want to drag Budapest's million-strong population into the abyss with them. What is the Hungarian capital to them, with its sights and cultural values? It goes without saying that the entire responsibility for the civilian casualties, for the destruction of the city of Budapest falls on the heads of Hitler's clique of executioners and murderers.<sup>21</sup>

The *Sovinformburo* report served as a signal to change the perspective of revenge. From this point on, attempts to separate 'Germans' and 'Hungarians' in military print propaganda became increasingly visible. Whereas in 1944 German and Hungarian troops were often mentioned as a single enemy, by 1945 the newspapers began presenting Germans and Hungarians in opposition to one another. For example, articles now described Hungarian soldiers and officers surrendering and showing reluctance to fight for Hitler. As Major Vyacheslav Grinevsky, head of the department of army life, explained in the newspaper *Za Rodinu*, 'All the honest elements of the Hungarian army are now aiming for the Russians. There are known cases when Hungarian soldiers fight their way out of the cauldron to our side and turn their weapons against the Germans. They saw the Germans, who do not spare them – yesterday's allies, – or their capital.'<sup>22</sup>

Soviet propaganda acted in full accordance with this political orientation: to isolate Hitler's

<sup>15</sup> *Za Rodinu*. September 2, 1944

<sup>16</sup> *Geroi Rodiny*. November 28, 1944.

<sup>17</sup> *Suvorovskii natisk*. December 6, 1944.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelius: *Ibid.* 2011, 375.

<sup>19</sup> Ungváry: *Ibid.* 2003, 288.

<sup>20</sup> Zolotov: *Ibid.* 2007, 213.

<sup>21</sup> *Suvorovskii natisk*. December 31, 1944.

<sup>22</sup> *Za Rodinu*. January 10, 1945.

Germany, to tear it away from the last ally that continues to fight against the Red Army. In this regard, the crimes of the Germans against the civilian population of Hungary were particularly emphasized:

In the suburbs of the capital, our fighters met civilians who were hiding from the pursuit of the Germans and Szálasi's gangs. On one of the streets, the walls of its houses were pitted with shell fragments and the windows were broken. In some places, the houses were completely demolished – a destruction caused by the Germans themselves. Notably, there was one location where the Germans struggled to enter a particular house for a significant time. Eventually, they blew up the gates, allowing the SS to pass through the gap. More than 50 men, women, and children were then taken from the house, and the Germans immediately shot them.<sup>23</sup>

Prisoners and Hungarian soldiers who defected to our side say that in the centre of Budapest there is complete arbitrariness of the Germans... The Germans mercilessly shoot civilians for appearing on the streets after the set time, for fleeing from defense enterprises and forced labour.<sup>24</sup>

The newspaper of the 4th Guards Army, *Krasnoe Znamia* (Red Flag), published a series of articles from 30 January to 24 March, 1945, portraying the massacre

of Red Army soldiers tortured by 'Hitlerites' in Vereb.<sup>25</sup> Each article specifically targeted Germans, urging readers to remember the massacre and calling for 'Death to the executioners! Notably, no articles or calls for reprisals against Hungarians appeared during the same period, underscoring that the demand for revenge was exclusively directed at Germans.

Throughout the period when Soviet troops were present in Hungary, printed propaganda consistently used the well-developed method of publishing fabricated or exaggerated materials about the supposed joyful meetings of the local population with Red Army soldiers. For example, the newspaper of the 7th Guards Army *Za Rodinu* wrote: 'After long, nightmarish days of fighting, Budapest residents poured out into the streets, smiles shining on their exhausted faces. Budapest residents thank the Soviet soldiers who saved them from the Germans.'<sup>26</sup> According to *Krasnoe Znamia*, another propaganda outlet, 'Right now, the most popular person in Budapest is a Soviet soldier. Everywhere he appears, he is surrounded by a crowd.'<sup>27</sup>

The image of Budapest residents impatiently awaiting the Soviet troops, as depicted in propaganda, did not fully reflect the reality. According to junior Hungarian army lieutenant Ede Atzel, while most inhabitants of

Budapest did wish for the Red Army's arrival, this sentiment was not rooted in enthusiasm for the Soviet troops. Rather, it stemmed from an acceptance that their arrival was inevitable and a hope that it would occur quickly with minimal damage to the city.<sup>28</sup>

They mentioned the activities of the acute forms of the fascist underground in Hungary, emphasizing the Soviet viewpoint that 'fascist ideology has deeply penetrated the consciousness of many segments of the population.'<sup>29</sup> Soviet documents attribute the population's support for this hostile ideology to what they describe as long-term anti-Soviet 'propaganda of horror', which spread fears among civilians about the promised atrocities of the Red Army.<sup>30</sup>

Political departments and military commandants' offices noted that Hungarian civilians were often unfriendly, sometimes even openly hostile. A report from the end of September 1944 described a typical incident: a group of prisoners was being held as they passed through a Hungarian village. The Soviet officer escorting the column asked the local population to feed the prisoners. At first, the locals believed that the request was for the Red Army and refused, claiming they had no food. After it was explained that the food was actually intended for the prisoners, over time, so many products appeared that 'it was possible to feed three times

<sup>23</sup> *Krasnaia Zvezda*. December 28, 1944.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* January 6, 1945.

<sup>25</sup> *Krasnoe znamia*. January 30, 1945; *Ibid.* January 31, 1945; *Ibid.* February 1, 1945; *Ibid.* February 3, 1945; *Ibid.* February 8, 1945; *Ibid.* March 24, 1945.

<sup>26</sup> *Za Rodinu*. January 21, 1945.

<sup>27</sup> *Krasnoe znamia*. March 28, 1945.

<sup>28</sup> *Russkii arkhiv: Velikaia Otechestvennaia, Krasnaia Armia v stranakh Tsentral'noi, Severnoi Evropy i na Balkanakh: 1944–1945: Dokumenty i materialy*. Vol. 14–3 (2), Moscow, Terra, 2000, 334.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 2000, 328–329.

as many people as there were prisoners.<sup>31</sup>

An analysis of military newspapers from armies that participated in battles in Hungary reveals a consistent use of negative characteristics when referring to Hungarians. The main argument is that these newspapers deliberately encouraged suspicion and a critical attitude among soldiers toward the Hungarian civilian population. 'Hostile' was defined through these negative connotations. For example, in a November issue of *Muzhestvo* (Courage) of the 27th Army, correspondent Captain Veniamin Goriachikh emphasized the need for vigilance, stating that Red Army soldiers were now in a hostile country that had remained aligned with Nazi Germany.<sup>32</sup> Such narratives portrayed civilian Hungarians as inherently suspicious.

According to the vigilance strategy implemented by print propaganda, interaction with the civilian population was not depicted as joyful or friendly. On the contrary, propaganda argued that even people who seemed to belong to loyal classes, such as peasants, might hide spies trying to 'get our people drunk with their hospitality.'<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, materials appeared about soldiers who became 'victims' of the Hungarians. For example, in an article by Captain Goryachikh, he describes an incident with Petty Officer Sergeev. Sergeev entered a village house unarmed

to warm up. Inside, there were three unknown men. The petty officer was struck on the head and received three stab wounds to the chest. The author also emphasized that the enemy uses women who eavesdrop and collect information from careless military personnel.<sup>34</sup>

Examples of 'correct' behaviour were also considered in newspaper pages, highlighting successful contacts with the civilian population, particularly the identification of suspicious persons. For example, during a march, Senior Sergeant Gerasimenko and Private Brezhnev stopped a peasant's cart loaded with hay; during the search, they found a machine gun. This event was detailed in a note by Senior Lieutenant Mikhail Borisovich published in *Geroĭ Rodiny* (Hero of the Motherland) of the 46th Army.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the frontline newspaper *Suvorovskii Natisk* (The Suvorov Attack) reported on a woman who approached the Soviet side posing as a 'victim of Hitler's arbitrariness.' It was later revealed that she was a spy, proficient in reading maps, setting up a radio station, and speaking several languages fluently.<sup>36</sup> Building on these accounts, *Suvorovskii Natisk* published three more stories on 21 December about the discovery of Hungarian spies among the civilian population.<sup>37</sup>

In general, we examined the image of Hungary created and promoted in the Soviet military press through 1944 and 1945, as

part of the revenge propaganda and narratives on interactions with the Hungarian civilian population. First, during 1944, Soviet propaganda portrayed Hungarians as allies of Nazi Germany. As a result, it actively called for revenge for the crimes committed by Hungarian troops in the occupied Soviet territories. In addition, the analyzed newspapers do not specify which Hungarians the call for revenge applies to and which it does not, at least in 1944. From early 1945, the policy of revenge changed. The narratives portray Hungarian combatants and the population as victims of the German occupation forces. Secondly, analyzing the texts of newspapers from armies that conducted combat operations in Hungary revealed the practice of referring to civilian Hungarians in terms with negative, hostile connotations. Propaganda considered a successful interaction with the local population the identification of spies and saboteurs who harmed the Red Army.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksandr Senyavskiy, Elena Senyavskaya, Oleg Sdvizhkov: *Osvoboditel'naiia missiia Krasnoĭ Armii v 1944-1945 gg.: gumanitarnye i sotsialno-psikhologicheskie aspekty*. Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2015, 94.

<sup>32</sup> *Muzhestvo*. November 2, 1944.

<sup>33</sup> *Geroĭ Rodiny*. November 26, 1944.

<sup>34</sup> *Muzhestvo*. November 2, 1944.

<sup>35</sup> *Geroĭ Rodiny*. November 14, 1944.

<sup>36</sup> *Suvorovskii natisk*. December 6, 1944.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* December 21, 1944.

Imre Molnár

# The Significance of Polish–Hungarian Friendship in the Intellectual Legacy of Tibor Pákh<sup>1</sup>



The connection with the Polish nation was always present in some way throughout the life of Dr Tibor Pákh. In our conversations, he always referred to the Poles as a brother nation, bound to us Hungarians by a thousand years of historical ties and a shared destiny. He came to this realization not only thanks to the history curriculum taught in Hungarian schools between the two world wars, which gave prominence to the teaching of Hungarian-Polish friendship, but also through his own life experiences.

He was only fifteen years old when, in March 1939, the Hungarian-Polish border, which had been lost in 1920, was partially restored. As Hungarian military units reached the Polish frontier running along the crest of the Carpathian Mountains, they were met by a Polish honour guard and a triumphal arch bearing the inscription *‘Witamy!’*.<sup>2</sup> Photographs capturing Hungarian and Polish soldiers meeting along the 180-kilometre stretch of this renewed thousand-year-old border, embracing each other with unrestrained joy, became

front-page news across Hungary. But their impact reached beyond the newspapers: they deeply moved the young man who already loved Hungarian history with passionate devotion. Equally powerful were the words spoken by General Ferenc Szombathelyi, the commander of the Hungarian officers’ delegation, to General Waclaw Scaevola-Wieczorkiewicz, commander of the Polish 10th Corps in Przemyśl, and his officers at the Uzsok Pass, soon published in both the Hungarian and Polish press:

The restoration of the Hungarian-Polish border is an unforgettable moment in all our lives. We know with certainty that this border will always remain a shared one, just as the Polish and Hungarian souls are kindred: chivalrous, noble, devoted to liberty, and deeply imbued with the spirit of independence. It was this spirit that inspired us in the past and has brought us together once again on the ridges of the Carpathians. Our territories may have been separated for a time, but our souls could never be divided. We trusted that we would one day

find each other’s hands again and join them in friendship, for our hearts have always beat as one.<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, this seemingly cloudless reunion and the peaceful period it symbolized did not last long in the histories of the two nations. In September 1939, following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Poland was first invaded by Nazi Germany and then struck from the east by the Soviet Union. Soon afterward, both the German Reich and the Slovak State demanded permission to move their troops across Hungarian territory toward the shared Hungarian–Polish border, with the obvious intent of attacking the independent Polish state from the south.<sup>4</sup> The Hungarian government, however, resisted these demands. Treating its relationship with Poland as a ‘matter of honor’, it refused to permit any military operation directed against the Poles from Hungarian territory.<sup>5</sup> Instead, on 18 September, Hungary opened its borders, allowing tens of thousands of Polish refugees, including military units, to cross into the country. Some of them continued their journey westward,

<sup>1</sup> This study was previously published in Hungarian as: Imre Molnár, “A magyar–lengyel barátság jelentősége Pákh Tibor életművében” [The significance of Hungarian-Polish friendship in the life’s work of Tibor Pákh] *Rendszerváltó Szemle*, 1/2025, 90–97.

<sup>2</sup> Welcome! (in Polish)

<sup>3</sup> Zoltán Babucs, “Lengyel–magyar kézszorítás az ezeréves határon [Polish–Hungarian Handshake on the Millennium Border],” *Magyar Hírlap*, 18 March 2019, accessed 18 February 2025, [https://www.magyarhirlap.hu/tortenelem/Lengyelmagyar\\_kezszoritas\\_az\\_ezereves\\_hataron](https://www.magyarhirlap.hu/tortenelem/Lengyelmagyar_kezszoritas_az_ezereves_hataron)

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see: Gyula Juhász, “A Teleki-kormány lengyel politikája [The Polish Policy of the Teleki Government],” *História* 1 (1980): 30–31; and Gábor Lagzi, “Szlovákia támadása Lengyelország ellen 1939 szeptemberében [Slovakia’s Attack on Poland in September 1939],” *Haditechnika* 1 (2012): 73–75.

<sup>5</sup> E. László Varga, “Egy nem publikált Teleki-levél kapcsán a volt miniszterelnökről. Tények és dokumentumok [On a Previously Unpublished Letter of Teleki: Facts and Documents],” *Studia Caroliensia* 2 (2004): 52–53.

while others found temporary refuge in Hungary during the long years of occupation.<sup>6</sup>

In several towns across Hungary – including Komárom, the hometown of Pákh – a number of camps were established to provide shelter to Polish refugees. Most of these camps served as temporary accommodation for soldiers, while civilians found shelter in private homes, holiday houses, or hotels.<sup>7</sup> Many Hungarian aristocratic and noble families, whose ancestors often had Polish roots or kinship ties, played an active role in organizing assistance for the Polish refugees. Therefore, Pákh's family home in Komárom was among those that welcomed Polish refugees. Tibor's parents not only provided accommodation and food, but also offered emotional and spiritual support to those they sheltered. Every evening, Pákh's mother who was a pianist, played different pieces by Chopin, ending with the religious hymn called *Boże, coś Polskę* ("God, Thou Who Hast Poland"), which she sang together with the refugees.<sup>8</sup> (At that time this hymn was part of the school curriculum in Hungary.) In remembrance of the Polish refugees who found shelter in the city during the Second World War, the Komárom–Esztergom County Assembly placed a trilingual memorial plaque, in Hungarian,

Polish, and English, on the wall of the former Pákh villa. The unveiling took place in December 2009.<sup>9</sup>

Tibor Pákh did not witness the post-war repatriation of Polish refugees from Hungary, as shortly after being conscripted for military service in 1944, he and his brother Ervin were captured by the Soviet army and deported from Austria to the Soviet Union. During the years he spent as a prisoner of war in Soviet forced labour camps, Pákh once again experienced a shared fate with the Poles, this time under bitter circumstances. Among his fellow inmates were many Polish prisoners who, despite having fought on the side of the victorious Allies, were subjected to the same fate as citizens of Hungary, a nation defeated as part of the Axis powers.

Pákh's deep sympathy for the Polish people may even have played a role in his choice of a life partner, as the woman he married in 1954, Edith Szabó, was of Polish noble descent. Although she no longer spoke Polish, the couple proudly displayed oil paintings in their living room inherited from her ancestors in Bydgoszcz. Despite the many hardships their family endured, Tibor Pákh and Edith remained bound by unwavering loyalty to one another until her death.

The next Polish episode in Pákh's life emerged in 1956. At the time, he maintained close contact with representatives of the patriotic university youth, from whom he learned that students were planning a demonstration on 23 October to express solidarity with the Polish people. The march was to proceed to the statue of General Józef Bem<sup>10</sup> – a site chosen not only to affirm Hungarians' support for the Polish nation, but also to symbolize their own desire to see political and social reforms similar to those unfolding in Poland.<sup>11</sup> Pákh immediately decided that he would take part in the demonstration.

On the morning of 23 October, I came to Pest from the automobile factory, and sometime between half past one and two I joined the marchers at Vigadó Square. From there I walked together with the group from the design office – first to the Chain Bridge, then across it, and along Fő Street to Bem Square. It was an uplifting experience to move freely in such a vast crowd, especially for me, as someone who had been marked and discriminated against as a 'politically unreliable' worker.<sup>12</sup>

For Pákh, the experience was made even more moving by the sight of young people at the head of the march carrying both the Hungarian and Polish national

<sup>6</sup> István Lagzi, "A II. világháború alatti magyarországi lengyel menekültek történetének főbb kérdései [Main Issues in the History of Polish Refugees in Hungary during World War II]," in *Tanulmányok a magyarországi lengyel emigráció történetéből 1939–1945*, ed. István Lagzi (Budapest–Szeged: Lengyel Tájékoztató és Kulturális Központ, 1979), 15–43.

<sup>7</sup> Witold Bieganski, "Lengyel háborús menekültek Magyarországon a II. világháború éveiben [Polish War Refugees in Hungary during the Years of World War II]," in *Tanulmányok a magyarországi lengyel emigráció történetéből 1939–1945*, ed. István Lagzi (Budapest–Szeged: Lengyel Tájékoztató és Kulturális Központ, 1979), 43–53.

<sup>8</sup> Miklós Pintér, *A megtörhetetlen. Dr. Karáczfalvi Pákh Tibor életrajza* [The Unbroken: The Biography of Dr Tibor Pákh of Karáczfalva] (manuscript, in the author's possession).

<sup>9</sup> "Befogadták a menekülteket. Lengyel hála a Konkoly-Tege és a Pákh családnak [The Refugees Were Received: Polish Gratitude to the Konkoly-Tege and Pákh Families]," *Komárom-Esztergom Megyei 24 Óra*, December 17, 2009, 5.

<sup>10</sup> János Tischler, "A lengyel Október és az 56-os magyar forradalom kölcsönhatása [The Polish October and the Interaction with the 1956 Hungarian Revolution]," in *Évkönyv 1996/1997*, ed. János Bak (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1997), 118–128.

<sup>11</sup> Miklós Mitrovits, "Magyar–lengyel kölcsönhatások az 1956-os forradalom idején [Hungarian–Polish Interactions during the 1956 Revolution]," *Újkor.hu*, 23 October 2016, <https://ujkor.hu/content/magyar-lengyel-kolcsonhatasok-az-1956-os-forradalom-idejen> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Eszter Balázs, "Interjú Pákh Tiborral [Interview with Tibor Pákh]" (1997–1998), ed. Zsuzsanna Körösi, *visszaemlekezesek.hu – Oral History Archive*, <https://www.visszaemlekezesek.hu/pakh-tibor> (accessed February 18, 2025).

flags. The demonstrators also held banners bearing the Polish coat of arms, and the crowd repeatedly chanted slogans celebrating Polish–Hungarian friendship.<sup>13</sup>

Tibor Pákh was present at nearly all the major events of the revolution until 25 October. On that day, during what he later called the ‘massacre in front of the Parliament’, he was wounded by gunfire and required hospitalization. Nevertheless, throughout his life he continued to visit the sites of the revolution regularly, as acts of remembrance and personal devotion.

Since my release, I have made a point of retracing that same route every year on 23 October. Even during the 1980s, I would always go to the statue of Bem at half past two to lay flowers. There were times when the Workers’ Militia took me into the building that now serves as the headquarters of the MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), or dragged me off to various other places. But there were times when I managed to lay my flowers, for instance, on 23 October 1985.<sup>14</sup>

After his imprisonment and forced psychiatric treatment between 1961 and 1971, Pákh began, in the late 1970s, to collaborate with

certain members of the emerging Hungarian democratic opposition. Only a few among them, however, could fully accept his demands, considered radical at the time, such as the immediate withdrawal of Soviet occupying troops, compensation for the damages and losses inflicted on Hungary by the Soviet Union, the restoration of national self-determination, and the rehabilitation and repatriation of Cardinal József Mindszenty.

The election of Pope John Paul II and the subsequent rise of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) trade union movement in Poland inspired great hope and a more courageous spirit among members of the Hungarian democratic opposition. In the summer of 1980, at the initiative of the *Foundation for the Support of the Poor (Szegényeket Támogató Alap, SZETA)*<sup>15</sup>, a humanitarian project was launched to provide summer camps in Hungary for children from disadvantaged Polish families. Tibor Pákh made a substantial financial contribution to support this initiative.<sup>16</sup>

Wherever he had the opportunity, Pákh emphasized the importance of Polish–Hungarian solidarity. In 1979, he took part in Pope John Paul II’s first pilgrimage to Poland, one year after the

Pope’s election. He carried a pilgrim’s cross adorned with red, white, and green ribbons to the papal masses in Częstochowa and Kraków. By August 1980, during the emergence of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), Pákh was already in Gdańsk.<sup>17</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that the apostolic mission of John Paul II would bring about a spiritual renewal throughout Central Europe – one that would, in time, inspire change in Hungary as well.<sup>18</sup> He himself recalled the events as follows:

By the spring of 1980, resistance in Poland against the excesses of Moscow’s Leninism had already become quite intense. Various organizations were being established – in fact, nearly every social group had its own organization. [...] The Poles had a publishing house called Nowa, a samizdat press. One of its editors was arrested.<sup>19</sup>

Miroslaw Chojecki, along with several of his associates, was arrested by the police in March 1980. He and his fellow inmate Dariusz Kobzdej subsequently began a hunger strike in prison as an act of protest. In solidarity with them, and in defence of Chojecki and other imprisoned dissidents, members of several underground

<sup>13</sup> The most frequently chanted slogans were the following [in Hungarian]: “*Poland shows the way, let’s follow Hungary’s way! All Hungarians unite, the Polish path in sight! Uncle Bem and Kossuth’s crowd, hand in hand, let’s march proud! Independence, freedom, Polish-Hungarian friendship! Solidarity with the Polish nation! Long live Poland! Long live the Polish Workers’ Party!*” Tamás G. Korányi, *Egy népfelkelés dokumentumaiból 1956* [From the Documents of an Uprising, 1956] (Budapest: Tudósítások Kiadó, 1989), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Balázs, *Interjú Pákh Tiborral*. (see previous citation for full reference).

<sup>15</sup> The Foundation for the Support of the Poor (SZETA) was a Hungarian opposition civil organization established in 1979 that drew attention to the social problems of Hungarian society. Its actions supporting families living in disadvantaged conditions were considered illegal, as the Hungarian state did not officially recognize the existence of “poverty” in the country.

<sup>16</sup> András W. Nagy, “Keresztes vitéz” [Crusader Knight], *Beszélő*, no. 24 (15 June 1991): 17–19. The summer camp for children from disadvantaged Polish families could only take place with a limited number of participants compared to the original plan, due to obstructive cooperation between the Hungarian and Polish internal affairs authorities. See: Interview with Bálint Nagy (1999). Conducted and edited by Zsuzsanna Körösi. *visszaemlekezések.hu – Oral History Archive*. <https://www.visszaemlekezések.hu/nagy-balint> (accessed: 24 February 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Miklós Mitrovits, *Tiltott kapcsolat. A magyar–lengyel ellenzéki együttműködés, 1976–1989* [Forbidden Connection: Hungarian–Polish Opposition Cooperation, 1976–1989] (Budapest: Jaffa, 2020), 48–49.

<sup>18</sup> Ákos Engelmayer, “Legenda opozycji węgierskiej – Tibor Pákh,” [The legend of Hungarian opposition – Tibor Pákh], *Podkowiński Magazyn Kulturalny*, no. 51, Online: <https://www.podkowińskimagazyn.pl/nr51/tibor.htm> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Miroslaw Jerzy Chojecki, together with the founding editor-in-chief of the independent Nowa Publishing House, was arrested by the police, along with Dariusz Kobzdej. In addition, the authorities also detained several other opposition figures.

opposition groups in Poland announced a public, collective hunger strike beginning on 7 May 1980, open to anyone who wanted to join. The strike took place at the parish and church of St Christopher in Podkowa Leśna – chosen in part because of its courageous pastor, Father Leon Kantorski, known for his steadfast support of those unlawfully persecuted, who welcomed and assisted the striking opposition members in every possible way. The participants also included in their declaration of protest an expression of solidarity with imprisoned dissidents from Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, the Czech lands, and Poland itself, all jailed for their pursuit of truth.<sup>20</sup> Pákh learned about these events from the reports of Radio Free Europe and immediately set out for Poland, determined to express his agreement with the goals of the Polish opposition by joining the hunger strikers with his own ‘fast of protest’.<sup>21</sup> He arrived in Podkowa Leśna on 13 May.

I found the church there and went to see the parish priest. I introduced myself and told him that I wished to join them in the spirit of Saint Adalbert. It was Saint Adalbert who, at the end of the first millennium, preached Christianity throughout the region. He was the bishop of Prague, took part in the confirmation of our King Saint Stephen, later went to Poland, and died a martyr’s death in Prussia. He is the patron saint of

Esztergom and Gniezno. For this reason, I, along with many others, regard him as the patron saint of Central Europe. So, in his spirit, I wished to join them now, near the end of the second millennium, as a protest against the inhuman Leninism of the Moscow empire and in the hope of regaining national independence. In other words, I wanted to protest against the same injustices that the Poles were protesting against. They allowed me to join.<sup>22</sup>

Father Leon Kantorski himself announced Pákh’s joining during that evening’s Mass. However, Pákh’s participation did not proceed entirely without obstacles. One of the hunger strikers, Leszek Budrewicz, later recalled the events as follows:

The arrival of Tibor Pákh was quite a notable event. He had heard about the hunger strike on *Radio Free Europe*. He was a severely persecuted opposition figure in Hungary, imprisoned, sent to psychiatric wards, and had also taken part in the 1956 Budapest uprising. He was an elderly man with grey hair, thin, modestly but neatly dressed, a bit like the Polish coach Jan Mulak. Hardly anyone knew anything about him, however, when Jacek [Kuroń]<sup>23</sup> learned that Pákh had been a Hungarian army officer during World War II, he became furious and said that as long as he lived, Pákh would not be allowed to enter the place. He

declared that he would not go on a hunger strike together with a fascist. Jacek had a rare ability to convince almost anyone of anything. If not immediately, then later, if not by one argument, then by another. He could also admit when he was wrong, though not often, but sometimes he was. Yet in Pákh’s case, I saw for the first time how he was ‘disarmed’. Everyone turned against him. I remember Róża Woźniakowska patiently explaining to him that Pákh had been a reserve officer, called up for service, and certainly had not committed any war crimes. Jacek feared that government propaganda might portray him as associating with one of Hitler’s allies. But to me, the thought was: if Ozjasz Szechter<sup>24</sup> could take part in one of the earlier hunger strikes, then what harm could possibly come from allowing an elderly Hungarian man to join? I don’t think anyone actually used this argument aloud, but even so, Kuroń was overruled – and as it later turned out, quite rightly so. Tibor Pákh was indeed fully entitled to join the hunger strike.<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, Tibor Pákh remained completely unaware of the debate surrounding his acceptance into the group – or at least, he never spoke of it. In truth, he must have felt truly at home among the Poles, as for once he did not have to stand alone in defending his convictions and pursuing his goals.

<sup>20</sup> *Głodówka w kościele św. Krzysztofa w Podkowie Leśnej (7–17 maja 1980 r.)* [Hunger Strike at the Podkowa Leśna St Christopher Parish, 7–17 May 1980], Online: <https://wzz.ipn.gov.pl/wzz/multimedia-1/fotografie-i-grafiki/2203,Glodowka-w-kosciele-sw-Krzysztofa-w-Podkowie-Lesnej-7-17-maja-1980-r.html> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Tibor Pákh preferred to use the term ‘fast of protest’ instead of ‘hunger strike’. As he explained: ‘In prison, what we commonly call a hunger strike was referred to as a refusal to eat. I was reluctant to use the term hunger strike for this type of civil protest, because in civilian life, eating is not obligatory. I therefore preferred to call it a fast of protest.’ See: Balázs, *Interjú Pákh Tiborral*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jacek Kuroń (1934–2004): the main organizer of the hunger strike held in Podkowa Leśna, a prominent figure of the anti-communist Polish opposition, and founder of the Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR). Between 1989 and 2000, he served as a member of the Polish Sejm and as Minister of Labour and Social Policy in two governments.

<sup>24</sup> Ozjasz Szechter (1901–1980): a Polish journalist of Jewish origin who gradually became part of the opposition to the regime from the late 1960s onward.

<sup>25</sup> See: *Głodówka w kościele św. Krzysztofa w Podkowie Leśnej...*

I was with them, and I felt very much at ease there, because it was clear that all the different currents of thought had found a common home in that church. Every evening there was a shared Mass, attended by the entire local community. People crowded even into the church garden, there was hardly enough space for everyone. Podkowa Leśna was, at that time, in fact a stronghold of Polish resistance – and of Polish–Hungarian solidarity as well. While I was there, I learned from the Poles how deeply they respected us, how much they wanted to act in the spirit of '56. Every group, regardless of background, showed an incredible interest in the events of 1956 and in what had happened in Hungary.<sup>26</sup>

Drawing on his personal experiences, Tibor Pákh was able to tell the group members about the events of 1956 and their significance. This only deepened their sympathy and respect for him. A telling sign of this was that during the daily Mass, which was almost mandatory for all striking members, both believers and non-believers, the Polish strikers prayed for Hungary, for Cardinal József Mindszenty, for Prime Minister Imre Nagy, the martyr of the revolution, for the heroes and fallen of 1956, and for the protection of King Saint Stephen in the 'Prayer of the Faithful'.<sup>27</sup> Pákh, who spoke several foreign languages, was able to communicate easily in both English and French with members of the hunger strike group.<sup>28</sup>

During personal conversations, I also learned from them how the Hungarian hussars had come to the defence of the Poles during the Second World War, and they showed me the hussar graves that they had tended ever since. When, in the spring of 1994, Podkowa Leśna made me an honorary citizen, I brought a laurel wreath on behalf of the Friends' Circle of the Hussar Museum in Sárvár to lay on those graves. Incidentally, Podkowa Leśna is also noteworthy for being the first place, among the communist countries, where a public memorial plaque dedicated to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was unveiled – on October 23, 1986, the thirtieth anniversary of the uprising.<sup>29</sup>

At this illegally organized and conducted ceremony for the unveiling of the 1956 memorial plaque, Tibor Pákh's greeting letter was also read aloud.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the events themselves, Tibor Pákh's sense of fulfilment was surely deepened by the fact that the hunger strike ultimately achieved its goal. Although the arrested Polish opposition members were convicted, most of them were released on probation. Pákh returned from Poland with a renewed sense of unity – something he had last experienced during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. What made this unity especially powerful was that it rested on the foundation of Christian solidarity, bringing together 'believers and atheists, workers and intellectuals, the

young and the old.' By joining this movement, Pákh himself became part of that spirit of solidarity and expressed his hope that he had contributed 'to the deepening of Hungarian–Polish friendship'.<sup>31</sup>

Pákh's decision to join the Polish hunger strikers also carried a clear symbolic message for those back home: Hungary also needs this kind of unity, this kind of determined spirit of protest that is not afraid of sacrifice and brings people together.

With the memory of this profound experience, Tibor Pákh embarked on his second journey to Poland, intending once again to 'fast' in the church of Podkowa Leśna as an expression of spiritual solidarity with the members of the Solidarity trade union and as a protest against the injustices committed by the communist authorities. Unfortunately, this time he did not make it past the border. He later recounted the events as follows:

When, in 1981, after the declaration of martial law,<sup>32</sup> I wanted to travel to Poland, they didn't let me leave; instead, they took me off the train. From this, I can only conclude that their surveillance methods were quite thorough, because I hadn't told anyone about my plans. It was entirely my own initiative. I set out on my own, my coat slung over my shoulder, two briefcases in my hands. As soon as the train pulled out of Keleti Station, a plainclothes officer and two border guards came into my compartment. They took me to

<sup>26</sup> See: Balázs, *Interjú Pákh Tiborral*.

<sup>27</sup> See: *Głódówka w kościele św. Krzysztofa w Podkowie Leśnej...*

<sup>28</sup> The Polish underground press also reported on Tibor Pákh's joining of the Polish hunger strike, in the publications *Opinia i Głos*.

<sup>29</sup> See: Balázs, *Interjú Pákh Tiborral*.

<sup>30</sup> In his letter of thanks, Kőszeg Ferenc and Mécs Imre also welcomed the unveiling of the 1956 memorial plaque alongside Tibor Pákh. Kőszeg, Ferenc. "Engelmayer." *Beszélő*, 1994/29 (July 21, 1994), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Tibor Pákh, lawyer. In *Magyar Füzetek 7: A lengyel földindulás* [The Polish Groundquake]. Paris, 1980, 103–105.

<sup>32</sup> According to other sources, this trip took place earlier, in early October 1981. See Kőszeg, Ferenc, and Kis, János. "Beszélgetés Pákh Tiborral" [Conversation with Tibor Pákh]. *Beszélő*, 1982/2, 52–59.

an empty compartment, searched me, and told me I would have to get off the train, as I was not permitted to travel. Naturally, I protested as there was no legal basis for them to prevent me from leaving. Despite that, they forced me off the train in Komárom. I immediately announced that I was beginning a protest hunger strike. I had to spend the night in the Komárom waiting room, as it was already late. The next morning, without my passport or any papers, I had to return to Budapest. I immediately wrote a complaint to the Chief Prosecutor, describing the abuse I had suffered and declaring that I would continue my hunger strike in the University Church<sup>33</sup> until my grievance was addressed. Every morning at eight o'clock I went to the church, and when they closed it, I went home. I did this for four days. On the fourth or fifth day, men who looked like paramedics knocked on my door and said they wanted to take me in for an examination at the psychiatric hospital. I told them they had no authority and no legal grounds to do so – they were not officials. Hence, they brought the police. The police twisted my arms behind my back, carried me into an ambulance, and took me to the psychiatric ward. I immediately told the chief physician that I was requesting a judicial review and that I would continue my hunger strike until it took place. The doctor agreed that I could continue the strike as long as I drank water. The judicial hearing was held about three days later.<sup>34</sup>

As a result of the so-called *judicial review*, Pákh was once again subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment. "Half an hour later I was lying on the treatment table, tied down; they gave me a haloperidol infusion, and within five minutes I was in delirium."<sup>35</sup>

However, the influence of the Polish example soon manifested itself unexpectedly in Hungary as well. By this time, Tibor Pákh was no longer left to face persecution alone – his friends and fellow members of the Hungarian opposition stood by him. Several of them visited him in the hospital, expressing their solidarity and sympathy, and offering assistance in whatever ways they could. Pákh later recalled with gratitude his former fellow prisoner, György Krassó, and Otilia Solt, who 'visited me with great kindness; of course, it was also an advantage that my case had become public. More than fifty people even signed a statement of protest. Although this did not change the brutality of my treatment. I was force-fed me so roughly that they even chipped my tooth.'<sup>36</sup>

In the meantime, news arrived that members of the Polish opposition had also protested against his forced psychiatric treatment, expressing their solidarity and sympathy with him. Information about Pákh's case was circulated across Poland through the telegraph network of the Independent Students' Association (*Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów*), which helped to mobilize public

opinion. As a result, more than two thousand people signed a petition demanding justice for Tibor Pákh.<sup>37</sup>

Although this did improve Tibor Pákh's situation much, it meant a great deal to him in terms of spiritual satisfaction. This is well reflected in his own recollection:

At the time, I stood up for the Poles, believing that one must be willing to make sacrifices for freedom – and, in the end, such sacrifice is never in vain if it is made for a just and honourable cause. As a result, my case received considerable publicity in the media, both in France and elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

Although Pákh was eventually released, he remained under strict surveillance. Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from consistently standing by 'the Polish cause' and expressing his solidarity with the Polish people. On the first anniversary of the signing of the Gdańsk Agreements, the Hungarian opposition organized a commemorative demonstration at the Bem Monument in Budapest – the same site where, on 23 October 1956, a solidarity rally had been held in support of Poland. The first person arrested on that occasion was Tibor Pákh, who was subsequently detained on eight further occasions.<sup>39</sup>

A year later, on 30 August 1982, marking the second anniversary of the founding of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), members of the Hungarian opposition once again

<sup>33</sup> He chose the University Church (Papnevelde Street 5–7) in his own words because, "For me, the church is the most calming place where I feel close to God, and because the altarpiece features the Black Madonna of Częstochowa." Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Szukalski, Wiesław. "Prometheus or Realists?" *Beszélő*, no. 25 (1988): 59–61.

<sup>38</sup> See: Balázs, *Interjú Pákh Tiborral*.

<sup>39</sup> See: Engelmayer, *Legenda opozycji węgierskiej*

gathered at the Bem Monument to commemorate the occasion. However, the police, deployed in large numbers, arrested the organizers at the very beginning of the demonstration. In their absence, Tibor Pákh delivered an impromptu speech – and, on this occasion, managed to avoid arrest himself. He demanded the immediate release of those detained and, in memory of the Polish and Hungarian martyrs of freedom, called upon the assembled crowd to join him in silent prayer.<sup>40</sup>

Following the brutal murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, the priest of *Solidarność*, Pákh's signature appeared among those of the Hungarian intellectuals who, on 3 November 1984, issued a public statement<sup>41</sup> condemning the crime and expressing their solidarity:

We share in the mourning of millions as we express our condolences and solidarity. The brutally murdered Father Jerzy Popiełuszko is mourned not only by his relatives, fellow citizens, and followers of Solidarity; his martyrdom was for all of us, for the peoples of Eastern Europe. He died for the elementary civil rights for which we must now continue to struggle without him.<sup>42</sup>

On 14 October 1984, an international symposium was held at the Polish Cultural Institute in Budapest on the subject of the

Yalta Conference. Among the invited guests was Tibor Pákh, who regularly attended the Institute's cultural events and even volunteered to speak at the meeting.

The organizers first asked him to conclude his remarks when he reminded the audience that in Yalta, Moscow had pledged to respect the political will of the occupied countries and to hold democratic elections. However, Dr Pákh continued his contribution, which amounted almost to a lecture. He stated that in 1956 the Hungarian people had risen up also against the Soviet falsification of Yalta. When he declared that on 4 November 1956 Moscow had violated the Yalta Agreement for the second time, the speakers and participants of the conference left the room.

The organizers, however, forgot to turn off the tape recorder, and thus Pákh was able to dictate the full text of his speech onto the recording. Following the incident – which caused quite a stir – Tibor Pákh's name was removed from the list of invitees to future events at the Polish Institute, as he was no longer welcome there.<sup>43</sup>

On 15 March 1987, at the statue of General Bem, Tibor Pákh recalled the memory of the Polish general who had protested against great-power domination in Central Europe, the *radiant faces of 1956*,

and the *divine spark* that had helped ignite the Hungarian revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Even after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the Polish people did not forget Tibor Pákh's courageous stand for Poland's freedom and independence. In 1994, the town of Podkowa Leśna awarded him honorary citizenship. The proposal was introduced by Father Leon Kantorski, the legendary Solidarity priest who had fought for freedom, with these words justifying the nomination:

For us, he was like the first breath of freedom and the herald of Solidarity. Despite the enormous difficulties in obtaining a passport at that time and the dangers associated with travel, he overcame every obstacle in order to arrive, if only for a few days, to Podkowa Leśna and take part in the hunger strike of 13–15 May, where, in the name of the Hungarian people, he expressed solidarity with the Polish nation.<sup>45</sup>

As a further recognition, in 2019, at the NNW<sup>46</sup> Film Festival gala held in Gdynia, Tibor Pákh was awarded the Door to Freedom statue. The award was accepted on his behalf by Mária Wittner, national heroine of the 1956 Revolution, who said:

It fills me with joy that my friend lived to see this well-deserved honour, because so few of us are

<sup>40</sup> See: Mitrovits, *Tiltott kapcsolat*.

<sup>41</sup> *The Martyrdom of Jerzy Popiełuszko Is a Mourning for All of Us: Statement by Hungarian Intellectuals and Workers* (Budapest, 3 November 1984). *Irodalmi Ujság*, no. 1 (1985): 6.

<sup>42</sup> Imre Molnár: *Az igazság szabaddá tesz. Boldog Jerzy Popiełuszko, lengyel mártírpap élete és halála a történelmi dokumentumok és visszaemlékezések tükrében*. [The Truth Will Set You Free: Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, the Life and Death of a Polish Martyr Priest in the Light of Historical Documents and Memoirs.] Budapest: METEM, 2011, 128.

<sup>43</sup> "Dr. Pákh Tibor felszólalására. Félbeszakadt a jaltai értekezlet!" [In Response to Dr Tibor Pákh's Speech: The Yalta Conference Interrupted!], *Beszélő* 1985/13–14, 125.

<sup>44</sup> Gábor Deák, "Március tizenötödike Budapesten. Méltósággal, erőszak nélkül" [15 March in Budapest: With Dignity, Without Violence], *Demokrata* 1987/3, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Uchwata nr 157/XLIV/94 Rady Miasta Podkowy Leśnej z 15 marca 1994 roku* [Resolution No. 157/XLIV/94 of the City Council of Podkowa Leśna, 15 March 1994], <https://podkowalesna.pl/thibor-pakh.html> (accessed 24 February 2025).

<sup>46</sup> NNW Film Festival – Festiwal Niepokorni Niezłomni Wyklęci [Defiant, Unvanquished, Enduring International Film Festival]

still alive. In 1956, we followed the Polish nation – and I hope that today we can still stand together.<sup>47</sup>

In early 2022, Tibor Pákh decided that, following Komárom and Pilisvörösvár, he wished to donate a statue of Cardinal József Mindszenty to the city of Kraków. In his view, Cardinal Mindszenty, Cardinal Wyszyński, and Saint John Paul II had done the most to help their peoples endure the harsh years of communism, paving the way for their spiritual renewal.<sup>48</sup>

When making the donation, Pákh expressed his gratitude for the preservation of the cults of the saints shared by both nations – Saint Ladislaus, Saint Kinga, and Saint Hedwig – as well as for the beatification process of the Servant of God János Esterházy, initiated by Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski of Kraków. To carry out the donation, he enlisted the assistance of the Polish Personal Parish in Budapest and the Saint Adalbert Association of Polish Catholics in Hungary. The statue of the venerable Cardinal József Mindszenty was unveiled on 6 November 2021 in Kraków, in the lower church of the Basilica of Divine Mercy, in the vestibule of the Hungarian Chapel.<sup>49</sup> As Tibor Pákh was unable to attend the unveiling ceremony due to illness, he was represented by Ákos Engelmayer, former Hungarian ambassador to Warsaw. The solemn dedication of the monument was also attended by Sándor Lezsák, Deputy Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, and Ryszard Terlecki,

who served as Deputy Speaker of the Polish Sejm. In his address, Sándor Lezsák emphasized that ‘Mindszenty’s dramatic life symbolizes the twentieth-century history of Hungary, the struggle for independence of Christian nations, and the shared destiny of the Polish and Hungarian peoples’. He recalled that during the communist era, the role of the Hungarian primate was paralleled in Poland by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who had been beatified in Warsaw<sup>50</sup> just a few months earlier, in September. The striking parallels between the life paths of the two cardinals were also mentioned by Ryszard Terlecki during his speech at the ceremony.<sup>51</sup> Following the unveiling of the Cardinal Mindszenty statue in Kraków – designed by Hungarian sculptor Sándor Klígl, recipient of the Mihály Munkácsy Award, and executed by stonemason Csaba Latorcai – an honorary concert was held by the Kraków Philharmonic Orchestra, in collaboration with the Hungarian Consulate General in Kraków.

The event, closely associated with Tibor Pákh’s name, also served as a tribute to the heroes of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. This act of donating the statue was Tibor Pákh’s final noble gesture – one offered on the altar of Polish–Hungarian friendship.

On one occasion, the editors of *Beszélő*, the former samizdat journal, asked him: ‘Why is Poland so important to you?’ Pákh replied:

‘Not only to me personally. Our two nations are bound together by Saint Adalbert, by the saints of the Árpád dynasty, and by the deeds of our great historical figures. *It is a thousand-year bond*. We must continue to work in this spirit today, as only then can Central Europe regain its historical role in maintaining the balance of Europe.’<sup>52</sup>

A precise and insightful answer – one that not only reveals Tibor Pákh’s deep attachment to Poland but also defines with clarity the true significance of the Polish–Hungarian strategic partnership and cooperation for the future of our region and of Europe as a whole. Pákh was a tireless defender of this unity – among his many other causes – and it is this goal that should continue to guide all those in public life and institutions who think responsibly about the future of our nations and our shared region.

May we find guidance in Tibor Pákh’s steadfast faith and indomitable will.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. See documentation of the festival: <https://festivalnww.pl/o-festiwalu/> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>48</sup> Akos Engelmayer, “Tibora Pákh wspomina” [Akos Engelmayer Remembers Tibor Pákh], *Biuletyn*, 2022/6, 9–10, [https://archiwum.podkowalesna.pl/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/Biuletyn\\_6-\\_www.pdf](https://archiwum.podkowalesna.pl/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/Biuletyn_6-_www.pdf) (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>49</sup> “Mindszenty József-szobrot állítottak a krakkói magyar kápolna előterében” [A Statue of József Mindszenty unveiled in the Forecourt of the Hungarian Chapel in Kraków], *Magyar Kurír*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.magyarKurir.hu/hirek/mindszenty-jozsef-szobrot-allítottak-krakkoi-magyar-kapolna-elotereben> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>50</sup> Bereznay István, “Felavatták Mindszenty József szobrát Krakkóban” [Statue of József Mindszenty Unveiled in Kraków], *Index.hu*, 6 November 2021, <https://index.hu/kulfold/2021/11/06/mindszenty-jozsef-szobor-krakko-lengyelorszag/> (accessed 18 February 2025).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See: Kőszeg, Kis: *Beszélgetés Pákh Tibor Tibor Pákhral.*

Dorottya Szénási

# Tibor Flórián and the Cultural Networks of the Hungarian Diaspora – Hungarica Research at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University



## Report on the research trip conducted within the framework of the Klebelsberg Kuno Research Scholarship

As a researcher at the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change, this year I had the opportunity carry out Hungarica (Hungary-related) research in the United States with the support of the Klebelsberg Kuno Research Scholarship. The research focused on the life's work of Tibor Flórián (1908–1986) and on the cultural networks of the Hungarian émigré community. Due to the nature of the Flórián collection, the project concentrated primarily on the organizations and interconnections of the Hungarian diaspora in United States. Through the study of the archival material held at Stanford University's Hoover Institution (collection reference 2006C18), not only the career of a single individual but also the cultural imprint of an entire historical era unfolded before me.

The purpose of the Klebelsberg Scholarship is to foster international experience and academic integration among young researchers, as well as to promote the discovery of Hungarian-related sources preserved in foreign archives.

This opportunity made it possible to study first-hand the documents of the Hungarian diaspora, and to experience personally how an archival collection acquires new meaning through scholarly interpretation. Among the Hoover Institution's Hungarian-related holdings, the Tibor Flórián papers offer an exceptionally rich source base: materials from émigré organizations, correspondence, financial records, editorial documents, émigré press publications, and personal papers reveal the networks in which one of the most active cultural organizers of the Hungarian diaspora operated.

**Tibor Flórián (1908, Selmecebánya - today Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia - 1986, Punta Gorda, Florida)** arrived in the United States in 1949. He was a writer, editor, and cultural organizer. Through his work with Radio Free Europe, the Kossuth Publishing Co. in Cleveland, and the Homeless Writers' PEN Centre, he linked together several spheres of the Hungarian American community, which made his career particularly relevant to my research on

diaspora history. Flórián's activity also sheds light on how the boundaries between political influence and cultural expression operated within the émigré milieu. His life story reflects not only an individual fate but also the broader patterns of a historical epoch, enriching our understanding of the Hungarian diaspora's role in the context of the Cold War and the later fall of communism.

The processed records revealed that the Hungarian Section of Radio Free Europe in New York functioned not only as a political but also as a cultural intermediary. The textual transcripts of broadcasts, editorial notes, and field reports from émigré correspondents provide a detailed picture of how the editors sought to maintain connections between the Hungarian diaspora and the cultural scene in Hungary, while navigating the ideological tensions of the period. During my research, I encountered numerous documents that, beyond the major events of history, illuminated the everyday realities of émigré life. Invoices

and expense lists, for example, were not merely financial data; they also reflected the material foundations of émigré existence – how funds were allocated to organize events, publish books, and sustain community institutions and cultural forums. The émigré periodicals and Flórián's collected clippings revealed the key intellectual themes that preoccupied his circle: literature, national identity, religion, and political independence were closely intertwined with the concerns of daily life.

The correspondence proved particularly fascinating: it brought into focus several prominent figures who played active roles in émigré affairs, including Gyula Borbándi, Gyula Desseffy, Tibor Eckhardt, Áron Gábor, Gyula Gombos, Klára Györgyey, Mihály Ilia, Imre Kovács, Sándor Márai, György Stirling, and Béla Teleki – all active participants in the cultural and intellectual life of the Hungarian diaspora. These letters are more than personal exchanges: they are also invaluable records of strategic thought and cooperation among émigrés.

Equally rich was the correspondence linked to the Homeless Writers' PEN Club, which documents communication with Hungarian writers across the globe, outlining a truly transnational Hungarian literary network that regarded literature as a means of preserving national identity. A particularly surprising and exciting part of the collection consists of documents from 1944 to 1949, portraying the war years and the process of emigration from a deeply personal perspective. Flórián's letters and official papers reveal

both the physical and emotional dimensions of exile: illness, fear, uncertainty, and the struggle of beginning anew. These records allow the historical period to be experienced through the lens of one individual life.

The personal papers make up a substantial part of the collection. Flórián's long-running family correspondence reflects his simultaneous sense of vocation and private struggle. The letters exchanged with his wife over several decades offer a poignant insight into how public dedication and private tension became mutually shaping forces. According to the records, their marriage – after the war, emigration, and the birth of three children – eventually ended in the United States. Flórián's former wife felt that for her husband, "the Hungarian cause" mattered more than anything else, which gradually led to bitterness and, ultimately, to a divorce initiated by her. Flórián, however, resisted the separation: his letters reveal that he even sought the intervention of a church representative to save the marriage. His wife nevertheless obtained medical certification declaring that the marriage was mentally and emotionally harmful, and she remained determined to end it. The letters from the war years still reflect a warm, hopeful, and affectionate bond – making it all the more moving to observe how that connection faded as Flórián became ever more absorbed in his public mission. He later remarried, yet his children's attachment to the memory of the first marriage remained lifelong, and this duality – between commitment to a cause and family – accompanied him throughout his life. Working with these personal documents

brought the past strikingly close: I encountered not only historical sources, but human lives, choices, and consequences. Thus, the research trip became not only an academic endeavor but also a profoundly personal experience.

My time at the Hoover Institution strengthened my conviction that historical research is truly valuable when it can illuminate both political processes and human destinies. With the professional support of the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change and the Klebelsberg Research Scholarship, this project contributes to revealing the story of the Hungarian émigré community in both its institutional and human dimensions. The Tibor Flórián papers – through their extensive correspondence, organizational records, notes, invoices and articles – constitute not merely an individual life work but also a fragment of a larger historical mosaic, enriching our understanding of the American–Hungarian diaspora and Cold War cultural relations.

Finally, the research trip also offered the invaluable opportunity, at the very beginning of my PhD studies, to spend time in the state of California, where personal connections allowed me to gain insight into local academic life. Beyond its scholarly significance, the journey was also a deeply inspiring experience – discovering California's beauty and diversity left memories, both professional and personal, that will last a lifetime.

Csongor Chira

# Gamification and the HistóriApp



HistóriAPP is a mobile application developed by the Institute and Archives for Research into the History of the Regime Change (RETÖRKI). Its aim is to engagingly present and explain the processes of twentieth-century Hungarian history to users, especially secondary-school students preparing for their school-leaving exams.

Mobile phones and other digital devices offer enormous potential that so far has barely been tapped when it comes to passing on classical values and important knowledge. Up to now, most applications designed almost entirely around the user's needs – and capable of producing impressive results with just a few minutes of practice a day – have been created primarily for language learning. Our goal was to create a similar app that introduces and elucidates Hungarian history, using playful tools in a format appealing to young people.

We do not intend for the application to replace school history lessons or textbooks. Rather, we see it as a supplement: something that helps users develop a liking for history – encouraging them, we hope, to look more deeply into topics that interest them – while

at the same time complementing the material taught in school.

A key goal during development was to make the quiz engaging and appealing to younger generations. This meant ensuring that both the technical implementation and the visual design were attention-grabbing, and that the games rewarded players appropriately. For this reason, the quiz sets in each topic area can only be opened once the user has completed the initial levels with a sufficiently high score. In addition, the app allows the results of specific groups (such as school classes) to be compared – creating the possibility of competition.

Another part of the application is the so-called 'knowledge base,' which presents each topic briefly and engagingly, offering concise summaries of historical periods that can be useful for learning from primary-school assignments all the way up to preparation for the school-leaving exam. At present the database contains 700 entries; its structure follows the national curriculum framework and is organized around conceptual, chronological, biographical, and topographical knowledge.

It is important to emphasize that both the quiz questions and the 'knowledge base' were compiled with the national core curriculum as the primary point of reference. The scholarly material was prepared chiefly with the aim of reinforcing and supplementing what is taught in schools.

Alongside its entertaining quiz-game function, the application can therefore also be regarded as an educational aid. As such, it must be suitable for developing competencies in line with clearly defined goals and areas of development. An indispensable component of this is digital competence – a framework for which has only emerged, evolved, and expanded over the past few years.

The topic areas covered by HistóriAPP span Hungarian history from the end of the First World War onwards. These topics appear both in the app's knowledge base and in the quiz tasks. The task types are essentially drawn from traditional formats. At present, the app offers more than 1,000 tasks across the following types: multiple choice, image recognition, completing source texts, placing events in chronological order, identifying the dates of events, picture puzzles, and sorting statements into the correct categories. Each

topic area includes three to five tasks of each type.

Below, we describe each task type in detail and examine how they relate to the concept of gamification: why a given task type is useful, what it allows us to measure, and what purpose it serves. In structuring the questions, we aimed to ensure that the app can sustain a sense of flow: the exercises must not be so easy that they induce boredom because there is no sense of challenge, but neither should they be impossibly difficult. When designing the layout and progression of the application, we paid attention to gradually increasing the difficulty level so that the app would also be suitable for assessing deeper knowledge.

### **INTRODUCTORY REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GAMIFICATION AND HISTÓRIAPP**

Developing digital competence in schools is closely linked to the concept of gamification. Gamification is better understood as a methodological element than as a method in its own right. It can be used both in the classroom and in its virtual extensions. Supported by the systems of online communication and media, gamification has become one of the most prominent phenomena of high-level interactivity. It is therefore hardly surprising that its use in education aims to activate learners and encourage them to engage interactively.

Even before the advent of the information society, there were numerous strong examples of playful approaches in education – such as serious games, edugames, and games designed specifically for teaching. From these developed game-based learning, and ultimately gamification.<sup>1</sup>

The process of developing the application is closely tied to questions of user experience, creativity, flow, stress, and immediate reward. Digital tools and online media content – and therefore digital pedagogy as well – are associated with a range of effects on users, from positive experiences to stress. In the areas of creativity, flow, stress, and instant reward, digital pedagogy is embedded within the broader system of communication and media studies. The positive effects – including immersion and the joy of discovery – have contributed greatly to the spread of infocommunication technologies over recent decades.

In our application, points function as the smallest units of motivation. They allow for feedback that is much faster and more continuous than, for example, school grades. By collecting points, users can progress through levels, which set out a larger, medium-term goal for learners. But event-based forms of motivation also have a place in gamified education – comparable to school grades – since badges, stamps, or certificates can also be introduced and collected. These motivating, collectible elements

can be earned for giving a correct answer, solving a task, or completing an assignment – yet they do not produce as strong a sense of failure in the learner if they fall short of the conditions needed to obtain them.

### **A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE DIGITAL PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

Although teaching and learning today are almost inseparable from infocommunication technologies, digital pedagogy does not simply mean the use of technical tools. It is better understood as an approach and methodological framework in which teaching is not centred on tools or curricular content, but treats the entire learning process as the system to be guided.

At first glance, this may seem to run counter to the educational reforms that began in the 1950s. Béla Pukánszky and András Németh describe these reform efforts as follows: *'From the end of the 1950s, the centre of educational reform – in contrast to the child-centred and individualistic ethos of nurture-focused conceptions – shifted towards the product, in a manner similar to industry. The chief regulating factor in the educational process became the curriculum, understood in the broadest sense. As a result of the curriculum-development movement, positivist-behaviourist pedagogical thinking and a technocratic outlook gained strength (Bloom's taxonomy, Skinner's programmed instruction theory, Bruner's structuralism).'*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Majuri, Jenni; Koivisto, Jonna; Hamari, Juho: 'Gamification of Education and learning: Review of Empirical Literature'. Conference: The 2nd International GamiFIN conference at: Pori, Finland, 21–23 May 2018. 11–19.

<sup>2</sup> Pukánszky, Béla; Németh, András: *Neveléstörténet*. Budapest, Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1996. <https://mek.oszk.hu/01800/01893/html/10.htm#Heading83> Accessed: 9 November 2025.

The theoretical foundations for developing digital competence today are still built in part on Bloom's taxonomy.<sup>3</sup>

From the 2010s onwards, researchers have described the rapid changes in our world using the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), which fundamentally affects learning processes as well. Education is increasingly realized through personalized, digital learning pathways in which algorithms and artificial intelligence also play a role.<sup>4</sup>

According to Bertalan Komenczi (2004), the task of the educator in the digital age is to understand how the information society functions and to incorporate new technological tools consciously into the teaching process.<sup>5</sup> The nature of the VUCA world compels teachers to engage in continuous professional development and to expand their digital knowledge. György Csepeli argues that in the information society, the teacher's role is no longer the transmission of knowledge, but the cultivation of critical thinking, questioning, verification, and the recognition of connections. This approach places the teacher in the role of partner or facilitator, in which developing digital competence becomes one of the central aims of pedagogical work.<sup>6</sup>

András Buda emphasizes that a lack of confidence in handling digital tools – whether due to technological anxiety, overload,

or a lack of motivation – can hinder the effective spread of digital pedagogy. At the same time, the teacher is not only a source of information but also models patterns of digital collaboration and communication.<sup>7</sup> In the tutor role, teachers do more than develop students' information literacy and digital competencies: they also teach them how to use communication tools and digital platforms designed for collaboration.

A second challenge – and one that goes beyond the level of mere tool use – arises once infocommunication technologies and digitally accessible online content have already been integrated into everyday educational practice. István Polónyi urges caution regarding the digitization of education: in his view, information technology must not reduce learning to the mere accumulation of data. The value of digital pedagogy lies precisely in its conscious, critically informed use of tools and in its support for recognizing underlying connections. Learning thus moves away from the absorption of large quantities of information and shifts instead towards 'recognizing structures and relationships, selective information processing, and seeing what is essential.'<sup>8</sup>

According to the research carried out by Boglárka Faragó in the course of her doctoral dissertation, the excessive or uncontrolled use of digital environments – such

as multitasking or divided attention – can negatively affect learning performance. Although digital tools make access to information easier, they also create challenges for concentration and the deep processing of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In support of Faragó's conclusion, I would argue that during multitasking the processes of perceiving, processing, and storing information, together with the retrieval of memory traces required by parallel tasks, place a burden on the individual that diminishes learning performance.

While the transmediality discussed earlier does not hinder learning in itself, the kind of parallel media consumption relevant to our application can do so, depending on the limits of cognitive capacity. As Faragó notes: *'From the perspective of learning performance, the secondary activity that is most harmful is the one that draws on the same cognitive resources as the learning activity, thereby diverting capacity away from it.'*<sup>10</sup>

Storing human memory in external databases makes it easier for learners to focus on creative processes without needing to memorize large quantities of information. Has the age of extensive memorization and rote learning therefore come to an end? I doubt it. Digital literacy encompasses not only the recall of information but also its search, evaluation, sharing,

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, B. S.; Engelhart, M. D.; Furst, E. J.; Hill, W. H.; Krathwohl, D. R.: 'Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals'. In.: *Handbook, Cognitive domain*. New York, David McKay Company, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Johansen, B., Euchner, J.: *Navigating the VUCA World. Research-Technology Management*, 56(1), 2013. 10–15.

<sup>5</sup> Komenczi Bertalan: *Elektronikus tanulási környezetek kutatásai*, Eszterházy Károly Főiskola, Eger, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Csepeli, György: *Az információs társadalom pedagógiai kihívásai*. Magyar Pedagógia, 2020. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Buda, András: *Digitális kompetenciák és pedagógiai kihívások*. Oktatáskutatás, 2019. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Polónyi, István: *Az oktatás digitalizálódásának dilemmái*. Educatio, 2017. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Faragó, Boglárka: *Az infokommunikációs technológia hatása a figyelemre és tanulásra*. Doctoral dissertation, ELTE. 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

development, and critical processing. It is the teacher's task to prepare learners for this complex body of knowledge and to cultivate the ethical and creative use of digital culture.

## GAMIFICATION

Gamification – or 'playful design' – is not an independent pedagogical methodology but a methodological element that can be applied in various educational environments, whether in the classroom or online. The aim of gamification is to make the learning process more interactive, more motivating, and more experiential, thereby increasing learner engagement. The theoretical roots of gamification lie in the concepts of 'serious games' and educational games (edugames). From these, game-based learning eventually developed, followed by gamification, which does not place the game itself at the centre, but instead incorporates its motivational elements – such as rewards, point collection, challenges, and feedback – into other activities.<sup>11</sup>

Gamification is not only about results and points: human beings – much like animals – learn, develop, and adapt through play. The teacher's role is transformed accordingly: instead of being a mere transmitter of knowledge, the teacher becomes a mentor who guides learning, and even a kind of game master who directs the learning process and sustains motivation. At the same time, gamification is not without challenges. If competition is pushed too much to the foreground, it can distract

from the real purpose of learning and provoke frustration. It is therefore crucial that teachers tailor the playful elements to the needs of the specific group, and to their pedagogical aims.

Gamification is closely linked to user experience, creativity, the experience of *flow*, and immediate feedback. According to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's theory of flow, this state occurs when an individual becomes fully absorbed in an activity and experiences deep enjoyment while engaged in it. A digital environment can create this experience with ease, but if learners are confronted with too many stimuli or with technical difficulties, it can lead to stress and loss of motivation.<sup>12</sup> Because flow involves altered perception of time and immersion in the task, applying the theory to online environments seems an obvious extension. The phenomenon of flow is also closely connected with interactivity and a sense of liveliness.

In a digital learning environment, immediate feedback and reward are essential. Point collection, badges, levels, and other visual elements help maintain motivation while reducing the sense of failure. Well-designed gamification is therefore not only enjoyable but also didactically effective as a tool for supporting learning.

## THE ROLE OF GAMIFICATION IN EDUCATION

The development of the internet and digital technology has brought new challenges for education. Younger generations learn

differently: they respond more quickly to stimuli, and traditional methods are increasingly unable to hold their attention. Teachers therefore need tools capable of competing with the stimulus-rich environment of the online world – and gamification serves precisely this purpose.

The gaming industry and education operate according to similar motivational principles: both aim to sustain participants' interest. Thus, the reward and feedback systems used in games (points, levels, badges) can be effectively integrated into the learning process as well. In this way, gamification in education is not merely an additional feature but a new way of structuring and assessing learning.

For example, instead of relying solely on grades, a point-collection system provides continuous feedback, allowing the learning process to be accompanied not by the experience of failure but by the sense of progress. While a bad grade can demotivate, the gradual accumulation of points provides a visual representation of advancement, offering a more positive learning experience.

Gamification is therefore not just a playful element but an effective tool for developing learner motivation, sustained attention, and self-regulated learning. Although the method is still evolving, it is already clear that gamification may become a defining trend in the education of the future – one that reinterprets the relationship between teaching and learning.

## TASK AREAS AND QUIZ

<sup>11</sup> Jenni Majuri, Jonna Koivisto, Juho Hamari: Gamification of Education and learning: Review of Empirical Literature. Conference: The 2nd International GamiFIN conference At: Pori, Finland, May 21-23, 2018. 11-19.

<sup>12</sup> Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály: *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

## ACTIVITIES

The topic areas of HistóriAPP cover Hungarian history from the period after the First World War. These topics appear both in the app's knowledge base and in its quiz activities. The task types are drawn largely from the traditional formats of quiz games: multiple choice, image recognition, text completion, placing events in chronological order, identifying the dates of particular events, picture puzzles, and sorting statements into the correct categories.

When structuring the questions, it was essential to ensure that the application could sustain a sense of flow. The questions must not be so easy as to induce boredom due to a lack of challenge, but neither should they be so difficult as to be unsolvable. Users should feel that during their time spent playing within the app, they are genuinely learning. In further development phases, it will be advisable to continue refining the gradual increase in difficulty so that the app can assess increasingly deeper levels of knowledge.

## CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The creation and development of HistóriAPP embody the effort to make the teaching of history more engaging, more personal, and more motivating, in line with the expectations of the twenty-first century. Within the framework of digital pedagogy – which treats the learning process as a unified whole and builds on the learner's active participation – it is particularly important to create meaningful learning situations through tools that are familiar and appealing to students. The methodological elements of

gamification support this aim: point collection, levels, badges, and immediate feedback are not merely playful embellishments, but key factors in sustaining learning motivation.

The task sets compiled in the application, the lexical elements of the knowledge base, and the variety of question types all serve the purpose of ensuring that learning history is not simply the passive reception of information. The goal is to create a learning environment that fosters the development of historical thinking, the recognition of connections, and the growth of digital literacy. For us, gamification is not entertainment for its own sake, but an experiential methodology that helps consolidate knowledge and deepen historical understanding.

In this study, we have sought to demonstrate that the teacher's role in the digital age has been transformed: the teacher is no longer merely a transmitter of knowledge, but a facilitator who guides the development of digital competencies, the acquisition of source-critical skills, and the personalization of learning pathways. In this process, HistóriAPP can serve as a supplementary tool that is both relevant and modern. It does not replace classroom teaching or the textbook, but helps students engage with history more willingly and more actively.

All this shows that combining gamification with digital pedagogy holds considerable potential for the teaching of history. HistóriAPP not only enriches the learner's experience, but also supports students in acquiring skills that are essential for navigating the uncertainties of the twenty-first

century, including critical thinking, digital awareness, and the capacity for self-regulated learning. Gamification is therefore not merely an additional methodological element, but an approach capable of building a bridge between traditional historical knowledge and the modern technological environment.

Download the application from AppStore:



Download the application from Google Play:



Richárd Fodor

# The Visegrad Lenses

## Using Multiperspectivity and the Language of Ideology in the Making Visegrad Histories Digital Erasmus+ Project<sup>1</sup>



*It would be very good if there were differences in the attitudes of party members and non-party members on the most important political, economic, or cultural policy issues. Because sometimes it also gets blurry. Well, there needs to be more discipline and a better political standpoint from party organizations and party members on the radio.*

János Kádár at the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party's Politburo meeting in July 1986.

This short remark by Kádár reveals much more than a moment of political instruction. It shows how deeply ideological language shaped everyday communication and expectations in the late socialist period. For the nations behind the Iron Curtain, Orwellian 'Newspeak' was not only an interesting thought experiment, but an everyday reality. It defined how people were expected to speak, think, and behave in public life. For history teachers and students today, such texts and sources offer an entry point into understanding the symbolic power of language in authoritarian systems. The *Making Visegrad Histories Digital* Erasmus+ project established a common Central European platform of experts, educators, historians, academicians, databases, and source collections to share and contrast the parallel experiences of the period of 1948-1989. This article explores how this international project, including digital, inquiry-based

history education approaches, can help learners uncover and interpret this kind of ideological vocabulary, while comparing different perspectives and experiences from the socialist past across the Visegrad region.

Keywords: *communism, Visegrad Region, history education, multiperspectivity, inquiry-based learning, international cooperation, digital learning*

### ABOUT THE PROJECT

History teaching has always reflected broader intellectual, political, and technological shifts. In the twenty-first century, the question of *why* and *how* history should be taught has again become central to professional discussions. In recent years, international conferences organized by *EuroClio – Association of European History Teachers* and the *International Society for History Didactics* (ISHD) have shown how much the role of history education is

being redefined. The titles of these annual events, such as *Why History Education?*, *What is History For?*, and *The Complexity of History*, clearly express this shift. They reflect how history teaching today must deal not only with the past, but also with the major challenges of the present – political polarization, globalization, and new technologies.

The Making Visegrad Histories Digital project (2023–2025) has brought together history educators, historians, and didactics experts from Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and several other nations to create a shared collection of digital learning modules about state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. The project is coordinated by the Slovak Center for Education and Innovation and EuroClio, in cooperation with The University of Wrocław, The German School of Prague and the Hungarian Historical Society. During the

<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the European Union

cooperation, several other institutions joined the work as the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change (RETÖRKI) and the Hungarian Committee of National Remembrance (NEB) and the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). The main aim of the project was to support teachers in presenting a complex and still sensitive historical period in an engaging, evidence-based, and comparative way.

The project team has developed nine ready-to-use compound learning modules and accompanying video lectures that focus on topics such as propaganda, economy, everyday life, public space, environmental movements, and cultural expression under socialism. Each module is based on the principles of inquiry-based learning, where students explore historical questions through primary sources and build their own interpretations. Rather than providing a single 'correct' narrative, the materials encourage open discussion, critical thinking, and empathy towards different experiences of the past.

A key challenge the project addresses is that in many schools, the socialist past is still taught primarily through national lenses, often focusing on local heroes, victims, or symbols of oppression. While these stories are crucially important, they can limit students' understanding of the wider regional context and the shared mechanisms of the socialist system. By offering digital, transnational learning resources on Historiana (EuroClio's open-access platform), the project



Poster of the project introducing the modules

made it easier for teachers to look beyond borders and to connect events and social phenomena across countries. Such cooperation has also made it possible to include translations for every module, activity, teacher guide and source as well. Teachers and students can access international historical contents in a range of languages, including Bulgarian, Czech, English, French, Hungarian, Italian, Montenegrin, Dutch, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, and Ukrainian.

Cooperation between historians and educators was central to this initiative. Historians provided source material and ensured historical accuracy, while didactics experts designed the classroom activities to be interactive and adaptable. The result is not only a collection of digital sources, lesson plans, materials, and tasks, but also a professional network of educators who reflected together on how to teach recent history in ways that promote democratic competences and historical literacy.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS IN A NUTSHELL**

### **CROSS BORDER COOPERATIONS**

International cooperation in history education has a long tradition of responding to (re)

emerging social challenges. Since the early twentieth century, textbook revision and joint history projects have aimed to reduce conflicts, strengthen understanding between nations, and promote shared values. The best-known examples include the Franco-German and later German-Polish textbook programmes, the Scandinavian *Föreningen Norden* network, as well as several Asian and European initiatives, such as the *Multiperspective History of Europe*, *Learning History that is not yet History*, and others. Most of these cooperative ventures were funded and coordinated by OECD, the Council of Europe, and EuroClio (Fodor, 2022), and showed that dialogue about history can support peaceful coexistence. Over time, they also became important platforms to help teachers and researchers learn from one another and to rethink their own national narratives.

In general, two main types of cooperation may be observed. One focuses on conflict resolution, helping societies with a difficult past to understand each other's interpretations. The other aims at regional identity-building by creating a more inclusive and connected vision of history. Both rely on long-term professional dialogue between historians, educators, and curriculum experts. Exchanges involving experts

and stakeholders from multiple nations and regions usually have a strong effect on later reforms and the entire education system. They shape professional networks and help participants develop a shared way of thinking about history, memory, and education.

### MULTIPERSPECTIVITY AND INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Developing students' historical thinking today requires more than transmitting factual knowledge; it calls for cultivating competencies that enable them to interpret, question, and construct meaning from the past. Two essential pedagogical principles that support this are *multiperspectivity* and *inquiry-based learning*. Both approaches emphasize active engagement with historical sources, independent reasoning, and reflection on how narratives and history itself are formed. Together, they promote complex historical thinking that is analytical, empathetic, and aware of diversity in interpretation.

Multiperspective competence is a complex set of knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills. It goes beyond simply knowing different versions of history: it seeks to develop students who are critical of sources, able to summarize diverse narratives, reflect on their own assumptions, and debate independently. Using the term *competence* (rather than predisposition, attitude, or strategy) emphasizes action, agency, and the educational goals of history teaching. In research both internationally and in Hungary, competence models share common elements: children need historical knowledge, values

about fairness and inclusivity, attitudes of openness, and skills such as interpretation, synthesis, comparison, and reflection. These components do not work separately but interact: for example, valuing openness helps students engage with sources they find difficult; skills of comparison help shape attitudes toward other narratives (Fodor, 2024; Kaposi, 2020; Strandling, 2003; Dárdai, 2002).

*Inquiry-based learning* complements multiperspectivity by giving students opportunities to build their historical understanding step by step, from primary sources, guided by meaningful questions. As László Kojanitz (2019) explains, source analysis alone does not make inquiry-based learning; what matters is how teachers provide support so that students can genuinely explore, imagine, and ask realistic questions about people in the past, their experiences, and motivations. Inquiry-based learning shifts the classroom from memorization to active research: students reconstruct events, weigh different sources, detect contradictions, and draw their own conclusions.

During the last two decades, digital technologies have brought a new dimension to this process. Online learning platforms and virtual cooperation tools make it possible to create shared educational materials more easily than before. EuroClio's *Historiana* platform, for example, allows international teams to develop digital modules that promote inquiry, comparison, and critical analysis. In this way, the earlier tradition of textbook diplomacy is now continued in an interactive, learner-centred

format. The digital space also opens new opportunities to deal with complex historical topics, including the socialist past of Central and Eastern Europe.

### HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TERMINOLOGY

One of the most important questions behind the project is how students can learn to recognize and interpret ideological language in historical sources. Socialist societies produced a special vocabulary that shaped how people could speak and think about politics, work, or culture. Terms like *worker*, *collectivization*, *land reform*, *planning*, *socialist progress*, or *goulash communism* carried meanings that were very different from their everyday use. Understanding this linguistic layer is essential to interpreting the past critically, but it also requires teachers to guide students carefully through the sources.

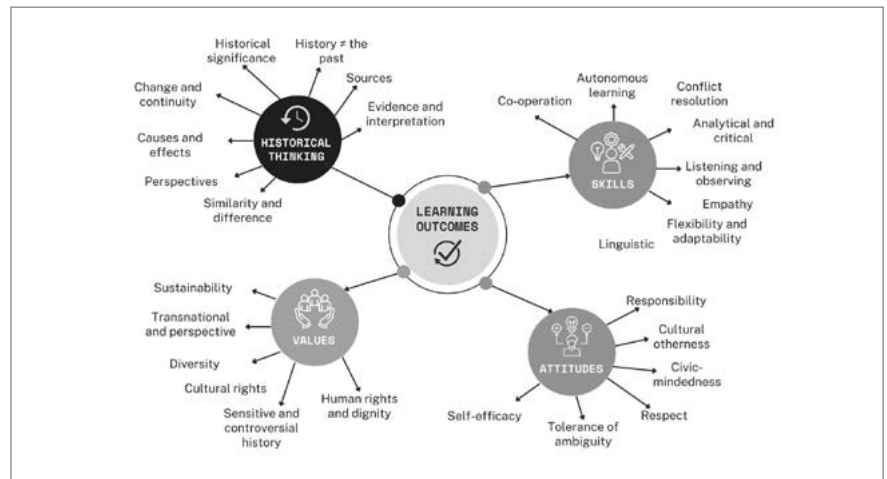
Digital and inquiry-based methods are particularly useful for this task. In several modules of the project, students analyse propaganda posters, newsreels, speeches, or everyday documents such as workplace newsletters and school instructions. Working with these sources online allows them to zoom in on visual details, compare versions from different countries, and annotate the texts collaboratively. They learn to ask questions like: Who is speaking here? What words or symbols are used to persuade? What is not said? These questions lead students to see that historical sources are products of their time, shaped by ideology, censorship, and power relations.

At the same time, the project also encourages students to approach the socialist past from different angles. For instance, a learning activity about public housing includes the voices of architects, workers, and families who lived in the same neighbourhood but experienced it differently. Another activity on censorship contrasts official press guidelines with the memories of journalists who tried to work around them. This multiplicity of views helps students realize that there was not one single experience of socialism, but many, depending on class, generation, and geography.

The Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change (RETÖRKI), the Hungarian Committee of National Remembrance (NEB), and the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) all actively contributed to the Making Visegrad Histories Digital (MVHD) project. Their expertise supported workshops held twice in Budapest, as well as in Prague and Wrocław, where they helped clarify communist-era terminology and provided reliable source material. By participating in these workshops, the institutions reinforced the project's focus on critical historical thinking, multiperspectivity, and inquiry-based learning in classroom contexts.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

The teaching materials developed in the project are designed to address four key dimensions of learning outcomes: (1) historical thinking, (2) skills, (3) values, and (4) attitudes. Through the



Web of cognitive fields developed by the project modules

developed learning activities and tasks, students are encouraged to engage critically with the communist past of the Visegrád countries by analyzing sources, identifying historical significance, and exploring change, continuity, causes, and consequences (Seixas – Morton, 2012). They also learn to recognize different perspectives, compare similarities and differences, and understand that *history* is not the same as the *past*, but rather an interpretation based on evidence.

At the same time, the activities strengthen skills, values, and attitudes that are essential for democratic citizenship and intercultural understanding. Learners develop analytical, linguistic, and co-operative skills while also practising empathy, adaptability, and conflict resolution. The tasks promote values such as human rights, dignity, diversity, and sustainability; and foster attitudes of civic-mindedness, responsibility, respect, and tolerance of ambiguity. In this way, the project contributes not only to students' historical knowledge but also to their broader personal and social development.

### LEARNING MATERIALS IN PRACTICE: TWO CASE STUDIES

*Children in Public Spaces*, the learning activity developed by Dr. Laura Vas examines how playgrounds and other public areas for children in 1960s Hungary reflected and supported communist ideals such as equality, community, and social order. Designed for students aged 13–19, the activity fits closely with the project's aims of developing historical thinking through visual and textual analysis. Using photographs from the Fortepan archive and short readings from period educational texts, students explore how everyday spaces were used to promote ideological messages in socialist Hungary.

The teaching process follows several guided thinking routines (reflection strategies) that help students move gradually from observation to interpretation. In the *See-Think-Wonder* routine, students first describe what they notice in an image, then explain what they think it means, and finally pose questions about what they would like to know more about. Later, the *Connect-Extend-Challenge* routine asks them to connect new ideas to what they already know, notice how their understanding is extended, and

identify questions or challenges that remain. These steps make learning structured and reflective while supporting evidence-based reasoning.

The activity also develops students' analytical and communication skills through discussion, comparison of texts, and a final creative poster task. By interpreting playgrounds as civic and ideological tools, students learn how public spaces mirrored wider social values and how visual sources can be used to study everyday life in socialist societies.

The second example is Wojciech Bednarski's learning activity *Colorado Potato Beetle – The Communist's Unexpected Enemy*. It explores how Cold War propaganda transformed even ordinary phenomena into powerful ideological tools. Aimed at students aged 13–19, the activity focuses on the Communist propaganda campaign that depicted the Colorado potato beetle as a symbol of Western aggression and capitalist sabotage. By analysing posters, newsreels, and children's texts, students investigate how political messages were embedded in everyday life and how fear and unity were cultivated through media narratives.

The structure of the lesson guides learners through a process of observation, interpretation, and comparison. Students first examine various propaganda sources, identifying visual symbols, slogans, and emotional appeals used to construct an image of the enemy. They then compare how the beetle campaign appeared in different countries of the Eastern Bloc – mainly Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary – highlighting



Screenshot of the annotative part of the learning activity on Historiana

similarities and national variations. This comparative approach helps students to understand propaganda as both a transnational and locally adapted phenomenon.

Through independent and group analysis, students develop skills in critical interpretation, listening, and observing. The activity strengthens historical thinking by showing how evidence from posters and films can reveal broader ideological mechanisms. By reflecting on how a small insect became part of Cold War politics, learners gain insight into the manipulative power of propaganda and the ways in which state narratives shaped public perception and civic behaviour in socialist societies.

## CONCLUSION

The *Making Visegrad Histories Digital* project shows how multiperspectivity and inquiry-based learning can strengthen history education through international cooperation. By using sources from several Visegrad countries – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and sometimes beyond – students can compare how the same socialist ideas, symbols,

or events appeared differently across borders. This regional approach helps them understand that history is not one single story, but a collection of diverse experiences shaped by national contexts.

The learning activities, such as *Children in Public Spaces* and *Colorado Potato Beetle – The Communist's Unexpected Enemy*, demonstrate how analyzing texts, images, and media from different countries supports both critical thinking and empathy. Students move from memorizing facts to interpreting sources and recognizing how ideology and everyday life were connected in various societies.

The project also highlights the value of cooperation between historians, teachers, and memory institutions from the region. Working together made it possible to create multilingual digital modules that present a balanced and comparative picture of the socialist past. In this way, the *Visegrad Lenses* project not only deepens understanding of Central European history but also shows how shared sources and perspectives can build democratic awareness and responsible citizenship among young learners.

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József Marton

# Hungarian History in English for French Students

## Report and Reflections on an Experimental Archival Pedagogy Session



A group of French students from the town of Pontoise visited our archive in Lakitelek at the initiative of their teachers, who, alongside Hungary's museums and natural attractions, also wanted to offer the young people an intellectual experience. From a pedagogical perspective, the visit promised to be illuminating: it offered a chance to see whether, and in what ways, the historical past of another country might speak to modern teenagers – and whether traditional forms of communication, namely archival documents, could capture their interest. A truly unusual visit deserved a suitably unusual topic, and the source material came from a rather exceptional historical episode. In the papers of József Szilágyi, a distinguished member of the Francophone Hungarian émigré community, we preserve records from an intriguing chapter of Hungary's anti-communist resistance. The story links the two countries – Hungary and France – and provides an ideal theme for hosting a foreign student group, since the events began in Budapest and unfolded in Paris, and survive today in documents written in both English and French. Through three interactive, source-based tasks, the French students were able to retrace the stages of this resistance movement – stages that could almost be given

thematic titles: publication – reproduction – propagation.

### I. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE EVENTS

In November 1951, as Hungary languished under a totalitarian communist dictatorship, a falsified copy of the official newspaper of the Communist Party – *Szabad Nép* – suddenly appeared in Paris. Dated 13 November, the paper seemed ordinary enough, but on its second page was an article printed in Cyrillic script about an opportunity to learn Russian. Only the title and the opening lines were genuine. In truth, the article smuggled in an appeal describing the oppression in Hungary, addressed to the leading body of the free Western world, the United Nations, which at that very moment was holding a session in Paris. The resistance fighters also used a clever trick when sending out the papers. The sender's name on each envelope was an impressive-sounding but entirely fictitious organization, such as the 'Free Trade Union of Hungarian Leather Industry Workers'. Around a hundred copies of the appeal were circulated in this way, and within a few months the leaders of the Hungarian émigré community in Paris had brought it to the attention of the wider world. The documents from the estate of

József Szilágyi, a journalist and one of the participants, guide us into their small but remarkable struggle for freedom.

### II. STRUCTURE AND EVALUATION OF THE SESSION

- cooperative work in three groups
- continuous teacher mentoring
- each task accompanied by photocopies of the archival documents, with solutions submitted on an online platform (LearningApps, Google Slides, Genially, Kahoot)
- a common didactic structure for every task: teacher introduction – individual text analysis – joint solution

Task 1: Damaged Newspapers (publication)

Articles and letters relating to the case were produced in both the Hungarian and international press – some in English, some in French. Each group received a letter written in one of the two languages and had to extract key facts from it. With that information in hand, they then had to deduce which parts had been obscured in a newspaper printed in the other language.

Task 2: The Evolution of the Text of the Appeal (reproduction)

Four French versions of the appeal submitted to the UN are known today. To establish the order in which these variants were created, six specific textual passages were selected. Each group had to locate the corresponding six passages in their own version of the document, and then determine the chronological sequence of the variants. The guiding principle: a later version is the one in which a phrase has been 'improved'; the unimproved reading shows the earlier form.

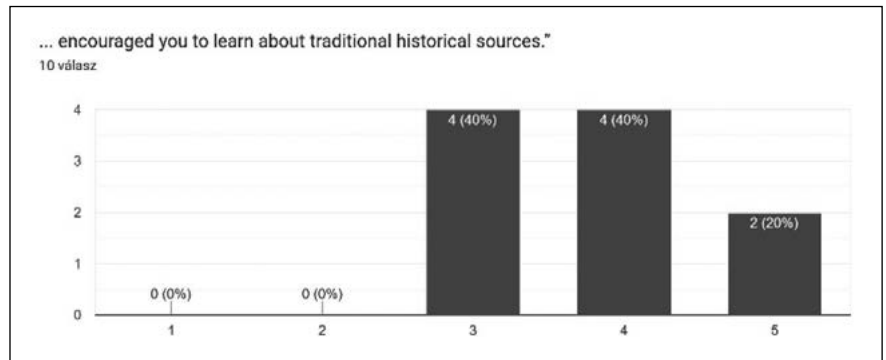
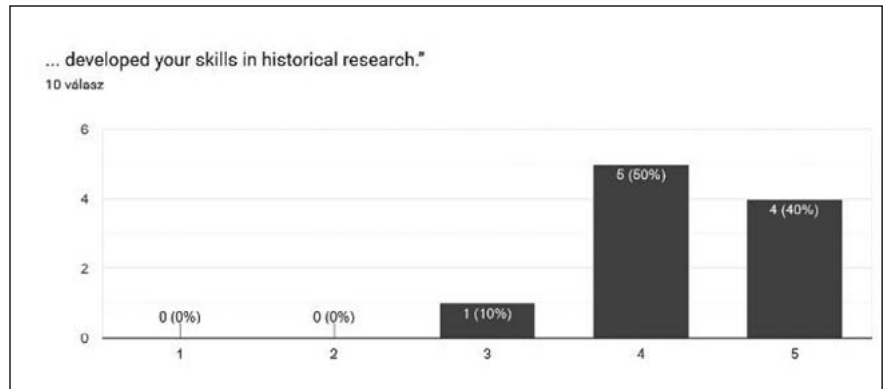
### Task 3: Decades of the Resistance (propagation)

The Parisian émigré community did everything it could to publicize the case. We know the steps they took from a report prepared for the central organization of the Hungarian émigrés, the Hungarian National Committee. This final task served not only as a recap of the historical events, but also as a way of capturing the students' personal engagement. They created an online banner summarizing the story and then demonstrated their understanding of the motivations and outcomes through a quiz.

### III. PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTIONS



To evaluate the session, I prepared an online questionnaire, organizing the questions into three thematic groups: To what extent did the session develop relevant competences? What

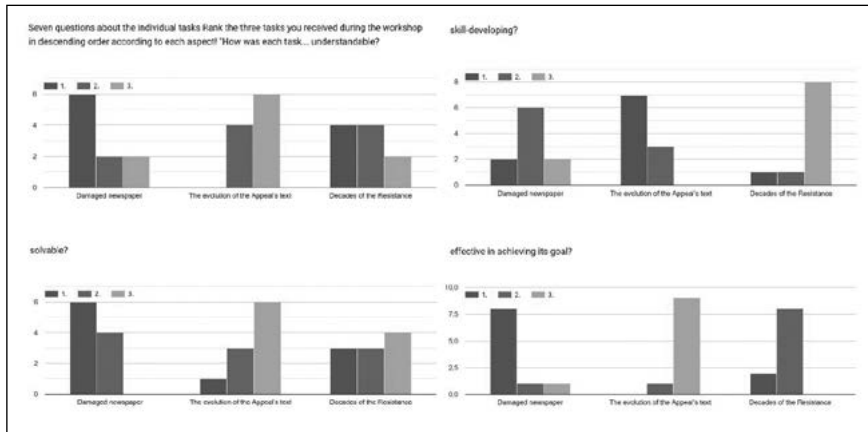


characterizes the individual tasks? What kind of emotional engagement with history did the programme generate? With a response rate of 71.4% relative to the number of participants, the sample can be considered representative. The evaluation below summarizes the most important findings.

Students rated most highly (92%) the opportunity to familiarize themselves with historical research methods, and, closely linked to this, the development of their own historical research perspective (86%). The programme genuinely guided them step by step through the terrain of historical work: What does source-critical reading look like? How can one trace processes within a single document? And finally, how can an entire sequence of events be reconstructed? It is perhaps unsurprising that, despite these results, the lowest-rated category (76%) was the students' general interest in history. This, too, reflects the sociological realities of today's world. It also

explains a certain ambivalence: while the young people greatly appreciated (90%) the modern IT components of the session, the exercises carried out on the digital platforms only partially succeeded in holding their attention (78%).

The three tasks cover different cognitive ranges: the first is analytical, the second differentiating, the third associative. These attributes are also clearly reflected in the responses. While in terms of the more superficial features (how understandable / solvable / well-targeted a task was) the first task was most highly rated and the second judged the most difficult, the students voted in precisely the opposite order when it came to the essential qualities of the tasks (how instructive / engaging / skill-developing they were). Particularly revealing is the fact that the second task – which, according to source-based criteria, is the most demanding – most often appeared at either extreme of the evaluative scale (six times out of seven questions). In other

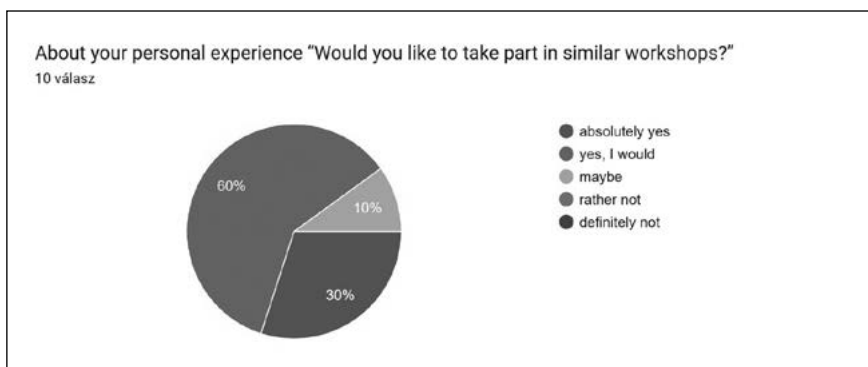


words, it seems to mirror the familiar experience that we are more inclined to abandon something when it requires effort, but if we persevere, it yields greater benefit. It is likewise understandable that the third task, which falls in the middle of the difficulty range, showed the fewest extreme scores in the evaluations (it occupied second place in five out of the seven questions).

When adding up the scores for the tasks, it is striking that the last three criteria were rated the most consistently by the students. Taking all seven aspects together, we can conclude that the differentiating task developed their competences the most, and the interpretive one the least; that the analytical task fulfilled its objective most successfully, and the differentiating one the least; and that the interpretive task achieved by far its best result in the category of being 'modern in approach'. Apart from this, noticeable variation between the

tasks arose only in relation to the 'experience' they offered; in the first, second, and fourth criteria, the participants rated the three tasks as nearly identical.

Although the aim of pedagogical work cannot be the deliberate shaping of a predetermined emotional attitude in young people, developing emotional intelligence is one of the foremost tasks of education. In this respect, archival pedagogy can hardly aspire to more than prompting a feeling or response in participants, since ongoing contact with any given student group is not typical. A realistic didactic goal, then, is simply to spark interest in the topic – whether understood narrowly or more broadly – and in this case that goal can be considered successful (84%). The final question of the survey was intended as a personalized indicator of this aim, and the students gave an exceptionally high proportion of positive responses (90%).



Nóra Szekér

## The Experience of Liberation – Lakitelek, 1987



Below we present an excerpt from the book published in 2023 by the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change (RETÖRKI) as the first volume of the *Oral History* series. The interview was conducted by Nóra Szekér, a researcher at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL), with literary historian Zoltán Bíró – founder and first acting chairman of the Magyar Demokrata Fórum [Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF], and the founding Director of our Institute. In this issue we publish a slightly expanded version of a chapter from the book dealing with the 1987 Lakitelek meeting.

### Why did you think a political consultation was necessary?

Two or three years before 1987, the idea arose that we should bring together the ‘camp’ open to change and willing to act for it. The consultation – and the founding of the Hungarian Democratic Forum<sup>2</sup> – had perhaps the most important immediate antecedent in the setback we suffered following the *Letter of the Nineteen*.<sup>3</sup> In that letter we formulated our proposals on crucial questions of national destiny and addressed

them to János Kádár.<sup>4</sup> Kádár appointed György Aczél<sup>5</sup> to conduct negotiations with us, but those talks, despite firm promises, gradually devolved into procrastination. In a final letter addressed to Kádár, we wrote that we could not work with a situation in which even their own decisions were not being implemented, and therefore we were ending the negotiations.<sup>6</sup>

### Why did the consultation eventually take the form it did?

<sup>1</sup> Szekér, Nóra: *Elbeszélt történelem – Bíró Zoltán*. Budapest, RETÖRKI, 2023, 165–177.

<sup>2</sup> Proclaimed on 27 September 1987 at the first Lakitelek meeting, it first took shape as an initiative to create a forum for discussing the most pressing problems, then from September 1988 as a political movement, and from June 1989 as a party. In April 1990 it became the winner of the first free parliamentary elections of the democratic transition, and the leading force of the government formed on that basis. For more details see: *A rendszerváltás mérföldkövei*. Eds. Házi, Balázs–Jónás, Róbert–Nagy Mihály, Zoltán–Rapali, Vivien–Strausz, Péter. Budapest: RETÖRKI, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Dated 27 July 1984, the letter was signed by nineteen intellectuals. Its main demands were the following: the authorisation of the civilian Bethlen Gábor Foundation and the journal *Hitel*; the publication of a volume presenting the history of Transylvania; the launch of a Hungarian-language television broadcast receivable by Hungarians beyond the borders; the establishment of an Institute of Hungarian Studies; and the creation of a state secretariat dealing with minority affairs. For the letter, see: ‘A tizenkilencek levele Kádár Jánoshoz’. *Rendszerváltó Archívum*, 2017/3, 42–49.

<sup>4</sup> János Kádár (1912–1989), politician; between 30 October and 4 November 1956 he served as a minister in the Nagy Imre government, and was the First Secretary – later, until 22 May 1988, the General Secretary – of the ruling communist party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP). He was the political leader of the dictatorship between 1956 and 1988.

<sup>5</sup> György Aczél (1917–1991) was a politician who served as a secretary of the Central Committee (CC) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) between 1967 and 1971, then as the chairman of the CC’s cultural policy working group from 1971 to 1974, and as cultural secretary between 1982 and 1985. He was the most important architect of cultural policy in the communist dictatorship after 1956.

<sup>6</sup> The letter, dated March 1986, regarded the postponement of the long-requested journal *Hitel* as its primary problem. It placed the events within a broader context and expressed an opinion on cultural policy as a whole. *Levél Kádár elvtársnak* (March 1986). Research Institute and Archive for the History of the Regime Change (RETÖRKI), XIV. 14. Papers of Zoltán Bíró, Box 2, Item 7.

This was also connected to the preparations for what became known as the 'second Monor'.<sup>7</sup> The agreement at the outset was that both 'their side' and 'our side'<sup>8</sup> would delegate the same number of participants. From our group, two people – Lajos Für<sup>9</sup> and István Csurka<sup>10</sup> – took part in these meetings, while on the other side more and more participants kept appearing. The final cause of the break between the two groups was the publication of the pamphlet *Társadalmi Szerződés* ('Social Contract').<sup>11</sup> It was released right in the middle of the negotiations, and it opened with the sentence: 'Kádár must go.' By contrast, for example, György Aczél was not mentioned at all. The text did not represent a departure from the framework of Aczél's cultural policy; its main point was the removal of the Kádár-type leadership.

I remember it was a summer afternoon. We were sitting on the terrace of the Europa Café – Sándor Csoóri,<sup>12</sup> Gyula Fekete<sup>13</sup> and I – waiting for the others to return from the negotiations. When we heard the news, we immediately decided that we would no longer bargain with them, but instead organise a meeting of our own. We began thinking about a venue. I no longer recall whose idea it was that the gathering could be held on

private property, in Sándor Lezsák's<sup>14</sup> garden in Lakitelek.<sup>15</sup> Lezsák wasn't yet part of this inner circle, but he agreed at once when we first asked him.<sup>16</sup> We also decided that the meeting should take place in the autumn. The organisers – Lezsák, Für, Csurka, Csoóri and I, with some involvement from Mihály Bihari<sup>17</sup> and István Bakos<sup>18</sup> – discussed the circle of participants. We agreed that each of us would notify roughly ten to twenty people. We arranged everything by telephone: partly because we could get an immediate answer, and partly because a letter would most likely never have been delivered by the post.

### How could someone end up among the invited participants?

We primarily invited people we knew and respected. The planned sixty participants quickly rose to eighty, then a hundred, and in the end we were roughly one hundred and eighty – though this did not cause any problems. The structure of the meeting had to be carefully planned. We chose Gyula Fekete, the oldest among us, to preside. According to the programme, after his opening address Imre Pozsgay<sup>19</sup> would give a lecture, followed by Csurka, and Sándor Lezsák

<sup>7</sup> Monor: a large Hungarian village where various opposition groups held a consultation in 1985. The 'second Monor' would have been the continuation of this meeting.

<sup>8</sup> The distinction refers to the different groups within the opposition: the former to the civil-rights-oriented, liberal opposition organised under the name 'democratic opposition', and the latter to the 'folk populist' (*népi*) group, which placed national questions at the centre of its concerns.

<sup>9</sup> Lajos Für (1930–2013) was a historian and politician. During the 1956 revolution he served as secretary of the Hajdú-Bihar County Revolutionary Committee, and during the subsequent reprisals he was interned. Between 1978 and 1980 he worked as a senior research fellow at the library of the Writers' Union. In 1987 he became one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), served as minister of defence between 1990 and 1994, and was president of the MDF from 1994 to 1996.

<sup>10</sup> István Csurka (1934–2012) was a writer and politician, and one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1987. He served as a Member of Parliament between 1990 and 1994, and again between 1998 and 2002, first as an MDF representative and later as a representative of the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP). He was the chairman of MIÉP from 1993 until 2012.

<sup>11</sup> The key authors of the liberal opposition, a programme text drafted by the Beszélő circle, which was published in the samizdat periodical *Beszélő*. Kis, János – Kőszeg, Ferenc – Solt, Otília: 'Társadalmi szerződés. A politikai kibontakozás feltételei'. *Beszélő*, 1987/2.

<sup>12</sup> Sándor Csoóri (1930–2016) poet and writer, one of the most influential figures of the national opposition during the Kádár era, a founding member of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1987, and editor-in-chief of the journal *Hitel* from 1992 until 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Gyula Fekete (1922–2010), writer, one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1987; in 1989–90 president of the Hungarian People's Party, established as the successor to the former National Peasant Party; one of the earliest figures to draw attention to Hungary's demographic problems.

<sup>14</sup> Sándor Lezsák (1949) is a poet and politician, one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1987. He served as the party's president between 1996 and 1998, and has been a Member of Parliament since 1994, first as an MDF representative and later for the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ).

<sup>15</sup> A village situated between Kecskemét and Kiskunfélegyháza, on the banks of the River Tisza. After moving there in 1969, Sándor Lezsák organised, already in 1979, a grassroots meeting that brought together the generation of young writers, and in 1985 an evening in the local cultural centre presenting a group of poets, which covertly commemorated 1956.

<sup>16</sup> According to the recollections of Kiss Gy. Csaba – also a founding member and active participant in the planning – after several unsuccessful attempts to find a suitable venue, it was Lezsák himself who offered Lakitelek as the location. Kiss Gy., Csaba: *Harminc év után: 1987. Személyes történelem*. Budapest, Nap, 2017, 85–88.

<sup>17</sup> Mihály Bihari (1943) jurist, head of the Department for Universities and Colleges within the Ministry of Culture, and later (between 1984 and 1999) head of the political science group, then of the Department of Political Science, at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

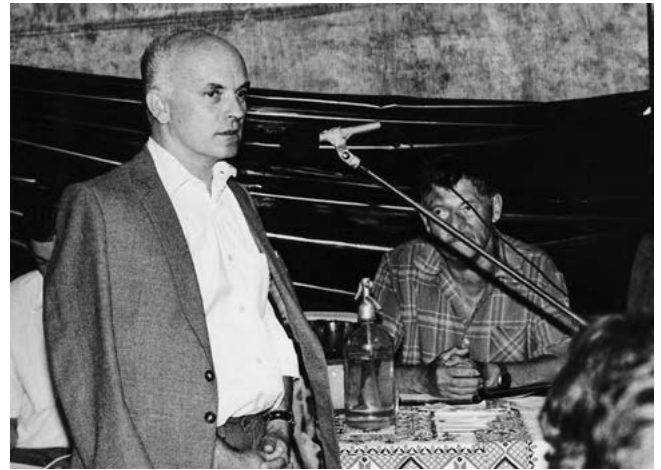
<sup>18</sup> István Bakos (1943) is a cultural researcher, the student leader of the Eötvös Collegium – an ELTE-affiliated college with origins dating back to the late 19th century. In 1979 he initiated and founded the first civil foundation, the Bethlen Gábor Foundation (BGA). Between 1979 and 1994 he worked at the Ministry of Culture.

<sup>19</sup> Imre Pozsgay (1933–2016) was a politician who served as Deputy Minister of Culture between 1975 and 1976, Minister of Culture from 1976 to 1980, and Minister of Education and Culture between 1980 and 1982. From 1982 to 1988 he was secretary of the National Council of the Patriotic People's Front, and between 1988 and 1990 he served as a minister. He was a Member of

would also speak as host. After that would come the spontaneous contributions. My task was to announce, midway through the event, the establishment of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. There was some debate about the name – it was the idea of Csaba Kiss Gy.<sup>20</sup> We scheduled the break so that there would be time to formulate our declaration. The basic version was drafted by Lajos Für, and the final text<sup>21</sup> was shaped by Bihari, Kiss Gy., Für and myself. It was read aloud, then a formal vote took place, and an overwhelming majority accepted it. The event dragged on for a very long time, but everything unfolded just as we had imagined.

### What debates were there regarding the list of invitees?

One point of contention, for example, was whether to invite members of the democratic opposition – but this was not the issue that dominated the preparations or the gathering itself. We quickly decided not to invite the ‘hard core’<sup>22</sup> of that group. We didn’t want them to steer the discussion in another direction. Looking back, this proved to be a good decision. They later claimed that they had been excluded because of Pozsgay, but in reality our decision had nothing to do with him. (It is another matter that Pozsgay was clearly pleased they weren’t there; their presence would certainly have been uncomfortable for him.) We invited Miklós Vásárhelyi,<sup>23</sup> György Konrád,<sup>24</sup> and László Lengyel,<sup>25</sup> as well as the son of Kálmán



Zoltán Bíró speaking at the first Lakitelek meeting in 1987. Photo: Antológia Publishing House

Benda,<sup>26</sup> Gyula Benda.<sup>27</sup> Konrád was invited by Csoóri – they had been acquainted much earlier through the Belvárosi Café.<sup>28</sup> Konrád came, took the floor, and struck a very friendly tone. He acknowledged that it was entirely appropriate for different groups to organise themselves independently. His presence was unusual because it could be explained through literary connections as well, and at the same time it ensured that the event did not appear to be ignoring the entire democratic opposition. Vásárhelyi and Gyula Benda did not attend. Lengyel came, spoke, and immediately began to raise the *népi-urbánus* debate.<sup>29</sup> I responded at once, saying that this meeting was not about reviving that debate – it had been a confused notion even earlier, and we ought to set it aside. This more or less closed the matter on the spot.

Parliament from 1983 to 1994, in 1990–91 as a representative of the MSZMP’s successor party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). Between 1991 and 1996 he was president of the National Democratic Alliance (NDSZ).

<sup>20</sup> Csaba Kiss Gy. (1945–2025), cultural historian, one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in 1987; was member of temporary presidency of MDF from 1988 to 1989, member of presidency in 1990 and member of the Board of MDF from 1989 to 1993.

<sup>21</sup> The final version was completed during the meeting’s break, together with Zoltán Krasznai, László Lengyel, and István Bibó Jr., in addition to those already mentioned. *Lakitelek, 1987. A magyarság esélyei. A tanácskozás hiteles jegyzőkönyve*. Eds. Agócs, Sándor – Medvigy, Endre. Lakitelek, Antológia, 1991, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Primarily the part of the group that published exclusively in samizdat was meant by this formulation, above all the editors and regular contributors of *Beszélő*.

<sup>23</sup> Miklós Vásárhelyi (1917–2001), journalist, served as press chief of the Imre Nagy government between 1 and 4 November 1956. He was imprisoned between 1956 and 1960 for his role in the revolution. In 1988 he became a founder of the *Új Márciusi Front* [New March Front], which gathered mainly the reform-minded communist politicians around Rezső Nyers, and of the *Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottság* [Historical Justice Committee, TIB], established as a community representing those condemned by the dictatorship.

<sup>24</sup> György Konrád (1933–2019), writer, one of the key thinkers of the democratic opposition.

<sup>25</sup> László Lengyel (1950) is an economist, lawyer, and political scientist, a professor at the Faculty of Law of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE).

<sup>26</sup> Kálmán Benda (1913–1994), historian.

<sup>27</sup> Gyula Benda (1943–2005), historian.

<sup>28</sup> A loosely organised group of writers, forming in the late 1950s and early 1960s and also functioning as a kind of literary circle, meeting regularly. Alongside Csoóri and Konrád, László Gyurkó and Gyula Hernádi were also considered regular members. See, *inter alia*: Szőnyei, Tamás: *Titkos írás I*. Budapest, Noran, 2012, 599–603.

<sup>29</sup> The debate that took place between the two world wars – primarily within the opposition to Horthy – can be summarised as a dispute between those who urged solutions to Hungary’s fundamental social problems and ‘national questions’ (land reform, population issues, etc.) – the so-called *népi* or ‘folk populist’ approach – and those who represented a Western-oriented modernization agenda, placing at the centre the questions of how to achieve democracy – the so-called *urbánus* or ‘urbanist’ side. The ‘heating up’ of the debate was often caused by differing approaches to the Jewish question.



Zoltán Bíró at the debate forum of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and the Hungarian Democratic Forum at the Budapest College of Political Science in Budapest on 20 January 1989. Photo: HU-RETÖRKIL XV.1. Lakitelek Archives of the Regime Change – Collection of Sándor Lezsák, Photo Gallery

### **Miklós Mészöly<sup>30</sup> was not there. Which camp did he belong to?**

I wouldn't place him in either camp. We had good relations with him – I personally admired his writings. He was on good terms with both Csoóri and Csurka. We certainly invited him, but he did not come.

### **How contentious was the decision to invite Imre Pozsgay?**

There was some uncertainty about whether we should invite Pozsgay or not – whether it was wise to have a representative of the authorities present, even though we knew exactly which side he stood on within the power structures. Perhaps Csaba Kiss Gy. and Csurka were the most opposed

to inviting him; they were deeply suspicious of him.

There was also the fear that the Hazafias Népfront [Patriotic People's Front]<sup>31</sup> might want to swallow us up. But this dilemma soon faded, and at the meeting itself I sensed no hostility towards him. The others asked me to speak with him to see if he would agree to attend.<sup>32</sup> I told him plainly that we would hold the meeting even if he chose not to come. He agreed immediately. We also had to decide whether to invite István Gajdócsi<sup>33</sup> and Pál Romány<sup>34</sup> from the county. If I recall correctly, this was Sándor Lezsák's suggestion. We wanted to create a situation in which our gathering would be entirely legal. Gajdócsi came, Romány did not. It was entirely obvious that the authorities were unhappy about the meeting – even more so than about the one in Monor. That had been a small, closed gathering; here, far more of us came together from all parts of the country. We felt it was equally important not to depend on any kind of permit or authorisation, and at the same time to avoid giving grounds for an accusation of illegal organising.

### **Were any of the speakers too radical, or did any interventions provoke particularly heated debate?**

There were one or two contributions that didn't quite fit. Gábor Czakó<sup>35</sup> began his speech with 'Dear Rabbits!', and although the substance of what he said was essentially correct, the opening sounded somewhat ridiculous. Imre Makovecz's<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Miklós Mészöly (1921–2001), writer.

<sup>31</sup> In 1954, under Prime Minister Imre Nagy, an official mass organization was established which sought to bring together the various bodies of Hungarian society, most of which functioned as satellites of the Communist Party. After 1956 it was not the ruling party (the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party), but the Patriotic People's Front that formally took part in parliamentary and local council elections. The organization's nature as a body of popular representation was largely fictitious; its real significance only emerged after 1982, when Imre Pozsgay was elected as its secretary-general. The party leadership had intended this appointment as a demotion for the communist politician, but he increasingly began to make use of the organization's hitherto purely theoretical powers, deliberately involving non-party and/or regime-critical intellectuals as well. It continued to function until 1989, although its successor, the Patriotic Electoral Coalition, also stood in the 1990 elections.

<sup>32</sup> Imre Pozsgay and Zoltán Bíró already had a long-standing working relationship by this time. Bíró had headed the Literary Department for two years during Pozsgay's tenure as Minister of Culture.

<sup>33</sup> István Gajdócsi (1924–1989) was a politician who served as the chairman of the Bács-Kiskun County Council (the county's local government body) from 1972 to 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Pál Romány (1929–2019) was a politician who served as first secretary of the Bács-Kiskun County Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) from 1970 to 1973, and again from 1980 to 1987.

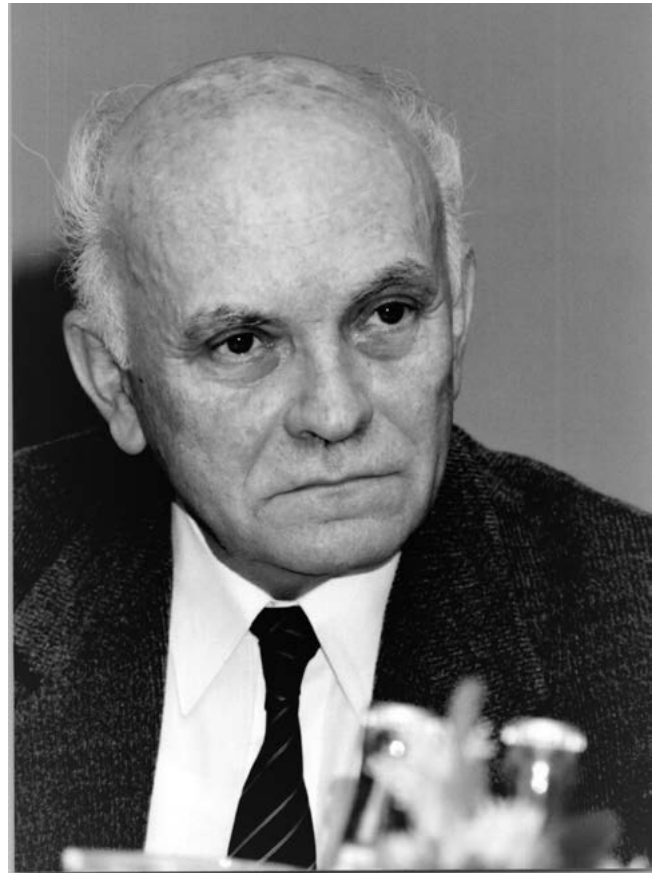
<sup>35</sup> Gábor Czakó (1942–2024), writer.

<sup>36</sup> Imre Makovecz (1935–2011), architect and founding figure of Hungarian organic architecture.

contribution was strange as well – he attacked Radio Free Europe,<sup>37</sup> but it wasn't really clear what lay behind it. Mihály Czine<sup>38</sup> said he felt the atmosphere had become too radical; he didn't approve of a few of the remarks.<sup>39</sup> I knew him quite well: he thought we should behave in such a way that the authorities would have absolutely no justification for taking action against the organising of the event. At that point he regarded the whole thing as a somewhat overly independent and risky undertaking. Yet with this opinion he was almost entirely alone.

Naturally, there were differences in outlook as well. Mihály Bihari, Csaba Gombár<sup>40</sup> and a few others clung to the idea of 'democratic socialism'. This failed to rouse much enthusiasm among the majority. Bihari spoke throughout about the problems of socialism. Gombár envisaged a multi-party system, but in his mind that meant a first and a second socialist party. His starting point was the internal division already visible within the MSZMP, which by then was an entity integrating several 'parties' and showing clear signs of fragmentation. In any case, both men held positions that would have made it awkward for them to take part in later organising. Bihari had established the political science group at Eötvös Loránd University<sup>41</sup> – he was the person who did the most, and the earliest, to introduce political science in Hungary. Gombár worked at the Institute for Social Sciences.<sup>42</sup> Overall, the spirit of the whole event resembled a kind of collecting basin into which water flows from many different sources. That was exactly what we had wanted.

### What united these different perspectives?



Zoltán Bíró on his 60th birthday, at the Kossuth Club in Budapest, on 21 April 2001. Photo: Collection of Sándor Lezsák.

On the one hand, the national idea; on the other, the desire for a genuinely democratic order.

### The 'third way'?<sup>43</sup>

It was inherent from the start. Naturally, some didn't really understand it, or disliked the term. There were those who rejected it even then, because they were clearly 'Western-oriented'. That orientation was very much present in Lakitelek. The

<sup>37</sup> Founded in May 1949 as one of the instruments of the Cold War, the Free Europe Committee launched its most important initiative with the primary task of transmitting Western messages to nations under Soviet occupation. The Hungarian section began operating in Munich on 6 October 1951. A significant portion of the Hungarian intelligentsia in Hungary regarded the radio station with deep scepticism, chiefly because of its controversial statements during 1956 or, in the 1980s, because of its perceived one-sidedness and its tendency to favour certain opposition groups. For more details, see Borbándi, Gyula: *Magyarok az angol kertben. A Szabad Európa Rádió története*. Budapest, Európa, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Mihály Czine (1929–1999) was a literary historian, a docent and later head professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), and one of the most important scholars of the *népi* writers, as well as of the literature of Hungarians living beyond the country's borders.

<sup>39</sup> Czine did not speak at the meeting, but – according to the minutes – he did not support the adopted text of the *Lakitelek Declaration*; based on the text, in particular he objected to the passage stating that 'our nation has no future vision that can be jointly embraced.' *Lakitelek*, 1987, *op. cit.* 1991, 178.

<sup>40</sup> Csaba Gombár (1939), sociologist, staff member of the Institute of Social Sciences of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) between 1969 and 1988, and president of Hungarian Public Radio between 1990 and 1993.

<sup>41</sup> The most prestigious Hungarian institution of higher education, which took the name Eötvös Loránd in 1950.

<sup>42</sup> The Institute of Social Sciences of the MSZMP Central Committee, which operated between 1966 and 1989, was a research centre conducting genuine social-scientific inquiry and supporting governmental work, and it also admitted representatives of the regime-critical intelligentsia into its ranks. Between 1985 and 1989 the Institute was headed by György Aczél. For more on the Institute, see: Pál, Zoltán, *Társadalomtudomány a diktatúrában. Az MSZMP KB Társadalomtudományi Intézete, 1966–1989*. Budapest, MNL – Mika Sándor Egyesület, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> A major intellectual current of the interwar '*népi*' movement, combining elements of Hungarian historical tradition, which emphasised the possibility of creating a distinct Hungarian path between the great global blocs and their differing economic systems. Its most important and most influential representative was László Németh.

differences became more sharply defined later. But there was a shared determination to detach ourselves from the Soviet-type dictatorship.

### **How do you assess the significance of the first Lakitelek meeting today?**

The main experience was not that great wisdoms were uttered, but that the event had a liberating force. Its symbolic value was immense: that we dared to appear as a sovereign community independent of the authorities. The issue here was not concrete steps; this was not a programme-forming meeting. What mattered was that many people dared to speak up for the need for self-organisation. At the same time, the question of regime change already emerged here. It was a conscious decision that this was not about reform within the framework of socialism, but a movement that questioned the entire functioning of the system. Of course the participants were diverse, but for us, the organisers, the aim was to change the system. Naturally this could not be stated openly. We presented ourselves as a political organisation, but not as a party. At that point nobody knew how events would unfold. There was full police readiness. Even Pozsgay and his companions – whom Ferenc Kósa<sup>44</sup> brought to the meeting – were stopped by the police. When we said our goodbyes at the end and left, I felt a strong sense of anxiety about Lezsák and his family remaining there. Night was falling, the family and children were there. In the end nothing happened, but the danger of police intervention was real. The authorities tried to signal their presence, but they did not interfere; overall they behaved with restraint. They did not really know which course of action to take; Károly Grósz<sup>45</sup> was uncertain too. We sent him a letter informing him that we had established ourselves; he replied, expressing his disagreement, but no action

followed.<sup>46</sup> Pozsgay, incidentally, informed Grósz about the meeting both before and after it took place.

### **How did you evaluate the meeting among yourselves at the time?**

First we recovered from the event; it had been a tremendous undertaking, full of tension. That tension could be felt at the beginning of the meeting itself as well, but later it turned into a kind of euphoria. At first we judged the whole thing with complete satisfaction, but within days the questions began to gather, and we had to decide how to proceed. The meeting ended with a short declaration, but it was not published publicly. It was after this that the idea took shape of a series of consultations on various topics, which we indeed began in January.

### **In November 1987 Imre Pozsgay publicly introduced, in *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation],<sup>47</sup> the statement announcing the organisation of the movement. Was this interview coordinated with him in advance?**

Yes, though not in every detail. Pozsgay was very shrewd and courageous at that time – he was genuinely a great help to us. On his part, there was also a certain provocative intent toward the MSZMP leadership. We kept asking Pozsgay to assist with press contacts. Gábor Tóth<sup>48</sup> sympathised with us. Pozsgay and he both sought to make use of whatever opportunities arose. We did not agree that the interview should appear in exactly this form, but it was clear to us that such an attention-grabbing conversation could only appear in that particular newspaper.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ferenc Kósa (1937–2018) was a film director and politician, and served as a Member of Parliament for the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) between 1990 and 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Károly Grósz (1930–1996), politician, prime minister of Hungary in 1987–88, and general secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) between 1988 and 1989, after János Kádár was sidelined.

<sup>46</sup> On 22 October 1987, in the name of the organisers of the meeting, Lajos Für sent a letter to Károly Grósz together with the Lakitelek Declaration, requesting that publicity for the gathering be ensured. See: *Dokumentumok a Magyar Demokrata Fórum korai történetéből, 1987–1989*. Eds. Riba, András László – Szekér, Nóra. Lakitelek, Antológia, RETÖRKI Könyvek 27., 2017., 19–21.

<sup>47</sup> A daily newspaper launched in 1938 as a conservative, anti-German outlet, which soon gained considerable appeal among the Hungarian intelligentsia. The paper continued to be published throughout the decades of the communist dictatorship, preserving a measure of bourgeois intellectual tradition even under party control. From 1954 onwards, it operated as the newspaper of the Patriotic People's Front.

<sup>48</sup> Gábor Tóth: journalist, deputy editor-in-chief of *Magyar Nemzet* between 1986 and 1989, and its acting editor-in-chief in 1990–91.

<sup>49</sup> Gábor Tóth published a long interview with Imre Pozsgay, in which the latter reported on the founding of the MDF, and the text of the Lakitelek Declaration was also included. This was of particular significance, because the press was otherwise not permitted to report on the establishment of the MDF. Tóth, Gábor: 'A közmegegyezés hajszál. Pozsgay Imre az állampolgári öntevékenységről, egyesületekről – a lakiteleki találkozóról'. *Magyar Nemzet*, 14 November 1987, 7.

György Bagi

# The Past, Challenges, and Prospects of Christian Democracy in Hungary

## László Varga's Treviso Speech



László Varga was one of the most prominent figures of Hungarian Christian Democracy and among the few *Democratic People's Party* (DNP) politicians<sup>1</sup> to win a parliamentary seat in Hungary's first free elections post-1989.<sup>2</sup> Born in Budapest in 1910 to a lower-middle-class family, Varga found his place early on within the workers' youth movement, where he developed both a strong sense of social concern and a commitment to Christian social principles. While studying law, he also taught, wrote, and directed plays. Influenced by the Jesuit Father László Varga<sup>3</sup> (no relation), he turned toward Christian Democratic ideas. According to one account, it was in his home in 1944 that the Christian Democratic People's Party (Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt, KDNP) was founded, in which he served as chief prosecutor. He was elected to parliament in the 1947 elections. As

the Communist Party, with Soviet backing, gradually eliminated Hungary's democratic parties, Varga came under political attack for his parliamentary speeches and for a courtroom defence he delivered on behalf of a *KALOT* youth member.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, false charges were brought against him, and he fled abroad with his wife to escape arrest. After short stays in Austria and Switzerland, Varga settled in the United States, where he became a leading figure in the Hungarian émigré community. He worked with the Free Europe Committee,<sup>5</sup> and helped found several organisations, including the World Federation of Free Hungarian Jurists<sup>6</sup> and the Hungarian Theatre of New York.<sup>7</sup> On international platforms – particularly at the United Nations – he acted as a tireless advocate for Hungary, submitting legal briefs and studies defending unjustly convicted

<sup>1</sup> Along with Gyula Cséfalvay and Sándor Keresztes.

<sup>2</sup> The first round of voting took place on 25 March 1990, and the second round on 8 April 1990. For further details, see the RETÖRKI Chronology: <https://kronologia-archivum.retorki.hu/kronologia/az-orszaggyulesi-valasztasok-első-forduloja> and <https://kronologia-archivum.retorki.hu/kronologia/az-orszaggyulesi-valasztasok-masodik-forduloja> (accessed 7 November 2025).

<sup>3</sup> László Varga S.J. (1901–1974) was a sociologist and the Hungarian chaplain in Belgium. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1918 and was ordained a priest in Innsbruck in 1930. He taught dogmatics and sociology in Szeged, and in 1936 was transferred to Budapest, where he became involved in the work of EMSZO (the Parish Workers' Sections), a Christian social workers' movement. In 1949 he became vice-rector of the Jesuit retreat house, Manréza. From 1950 he taught at the diocesan seminary in Szombathely, from which he emigrated to Belgium in 1952. There he taught sociology at the Jesuit college in Eegenhoven, and later served, until his death, as the Hungarian chief chaplain in Belgium. For a fuller account, see: Balázs Rigó, 'A szociális igazságosság Varga László S.J. munkásságában'. In: *Történelem és politika régen és ma*, eds. Péter Strausz and Péter Krisztián Zachar (Budapest, Heraldika Kiadó, 2013), 20–57, esp. 30–45.

<sup>4</sup> After the political crisis of 1946, relations between the state and the Catholic Church became increasingly strained, prompting the left-wing parties to commit themselves to weakening clerical influence. Their first step was a campaign against youth associations organised on a religious basis. The pretext for their dissolution was an attack that claimed the lives of two Soviet soldiers and a Hungarian girl. One of the most urgent targets was the *KALOT* (National Federation of Catholic Agrarian Youth Associations), founded by the Jesuit Fr Jenő Kerkai and possessing the largest mass base of any such organisation. A number of its members were unjustly brought before the courts. László Varga defended one such wrongfully accused *KALOT* youth, József Major, before the court in Győr. For further details, see: Margit Balogh, 'A *KALOT* története, 1935–1946'. In: *Történelmi Szemle* 1994/3–4, 283–298.

<sup>5</sup> Originally named the National Committee for a Free Europe, it was established on 1 June 1949 by private American citizens with the aim of supporting persecuted politicians and other intellectuals from the communist regimes of East-Central Europe. The Committee also operated Radio Free Europe. For further details, see: Gyula Borbándi, *Magyarok az angol kertben – A Szabad Európa Rádió története* (Budapest: Mundus Kiadó, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1953, the association worked on behalf of the Hungarian cause. It submitted memoranda and other legal interventions to the United Nations, for example demonstrating that Imre Nagy – not János Kádár – was the lawful prime minister, and protesting against arrests and executions. For further details, see: László Varga, *Fények a ködben. Egy életút a nemzet szolgálatában* (Salgótarján: Médiamix Kiadó, 2002), 99–103.

<sup>7</sup> In 1982, Varga founded the Hungarian Theatre and Arts Association of New York. Performances were held in the grand hall of the Hungarian House of New York, where both Hungarian classics (Imre Madách, József Katona) and modern works (Ferenc Molnár, Frigyes Karinthy, Jenő Heltai) were staged. Many of Varga's own plays were also produced there. For further details, see: Melinda Székely Mendel, *Magyar színháztársaság Amerikában* (Marosvásárhely: Mentor Kiadó, 2013), 64–71.

colleagues, Cardinal Mindszenty,<sup>8</sup> and the rights of ethnic Hungarians beyond Hungary's borders. After his permanent return to Hungary in 1992, Varga participated actively in the work of the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). President Árpád Göncz<sup>9</sup> appointed him extraordinary envoy and plenipotentiary minister, and from 1994 he served as the senior member of parliament for three consecutive terms. He died in Budapest in 2003.<sup>10</sup>

### THE KDNP'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS POST-1989

The Christian Democratic People's Party (Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt, KDNP), originally founded in 1944 under the name DNP, was a party rooted in the corporatist and Catholic renewal movements of the 1930s, emphasizing social issues and aiming – within democratic frameworks – at the triumph of the Christian conception of the state.<sup>11</sup> Because the party was forcibly dissolved in 1949 (and again in 1956), its politicians in exile sought, among other things, to build international connections. In this work, Zoltán K. Kovács<sup>12</sup> and László Varga played leading roles: Kovács mainly with European partners, Varga with parties and organizations in

North and South America. The KDNP, re-established in 1989 as the legal successor of the DNP, continued this effort. Although the KDNP performed modestly in domestic public life and in the 1990 parliamentary elections – owing to the difficulties of its early years<sup>13</sup> – it proved far more successful in the sphere of international party relations.<sup>14</sup> This is reflected in the fact that from the outset it maintained close ties with international organizations<sup>15</sup> and sister parties.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to these connections, the KDNP was able to participate, between 24–27 May 1989, in the joint Vienna conference of the Christian Democratic International (CDI) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which focused on Central European issues. In July of the same year it attended a meeting in Rome<sup>17</sup> organized by one of the CDI's constituent bodies. Later in 1989, a delegation from the European Democratic Union (EDU) also visited Budapest. The strength of these ties is further demonstrated by the fact that several Western European Christian democratic parties sent delegations<sup>18</sup> to the KDNP's founding general assembly in September 1989. In June 1990, the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD) admitted the KDNP as a member, and in August the party also joined the EDU.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>8</sup> József Mindszenty (1892–1975): Archbishop of Esztergom, cardinal, and Prince Primate of Hungary. Because of his opposition to the communist regime, he was arrested by the political police in 1948 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1949. He was freed during the 1956 Revolution and Uprising, after which he was granted asylum at the United States Embassy in Budapest. He left Hungary in 1971 and settled in Vienna, where he died in 1975. For further details, see: Margit Balogh, *Mindszenty József* (Érd: Elektra Kiadóház Bt., 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Árpád Göncz (1922–2015): writer, translator, and politician. He earned a law degree in 1944 and subsequently participated in the resistance movement. As the second defendant in the Bibó Trial, he was sentenced to life imprisonment and was released under an amnesty in 1963. He translated numerous classics of English literature into Hungarian and authored several novels and plays. In 1989 he became a founding member of the SZDSZ. In 1990 he served as Speaker of the National Assembly, and from 1990 to 2000 he was President of the Republic of Hungary. For further details, see the Árpád Göncz Foundation: [https://www.gonczarpad.hu/goncz\\_arpad\\_eletrajza](https://www.gonczarpad.hu/goncz_arpad_eletrajza) (accessed: 7 November 2025).

<sup>10</sup> For the biographical details of László Varga, we have drawn on his own writings: László Varga, *Kérem a vádolt felmentését!* (New York: Püski Publishing, 1981); Varga, *A Fecske utca és a Park Avenue sarkán* (New York: Püski–Corvin Publishing, 1984); and Varga, *Fények a ködben. Egy életút a nemzet szolgálatában* (Salgótarján: Médiamix Kiadó, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Balázs Kovács and Péter Strausz, 'A rendszerváltás kori magyar kereszténydemokrata eszmeiség és előzményei'. In: *Értékek mentén. A magyar kereszténydemokrata gondolatosság válogatott dokumentumai, 1970–1990*, eds. Péter Strausz, György Bagi, and Balázs Kovács (Budapest: Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet és Levéltár, 2025), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Károly Zoltán Kovács (1924, Magyaróvár – 2008, Budapest): agronomist, politician, and journalist. He served as a Member of Parliament for the Democratic People's Party (DNP), later becoming one of the most prominent figures of the Hungarian political émigré community, and subsequently took part in the reorganisation of the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP).

<sup>13</sup> The KDNP was re-established relatively late compared to the other parties, on 1 January 1989, and as a result it displayed various organisational shortcomings in the run-up to the elections.

<sup>14</sup> Róbert Szabó, 'Egy keresztény párt (KDNP) a rendszerváltás éveiben (1989–1990)'. In: *Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoportévkönyve*, eds. Attila Réfi and István Sziklai (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia – Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 2009), 51–62.

<sup>15</sup> For example: the Christian Democratic International (CDI), the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD), and the European Democratic Union (EDU).

<sup>16</sup> For example: the European People's Party; the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP); the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU); the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA); the Belgian Christian People's Party (CVP); the Swiss Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP); and the Italian Christian Democracy (DC).

<sup>17</sup> Róbert Szabó, 'A KDNP 1989–1990-ben'. In: *Múltunk jelene. Válogatás a Barankovics István Alapítvány honlapján 2013 és 2020 között megjelent írásokból*, ed. Mária Rita Kiss (Budapest: Barankovics István Alapítvány, 2020), 197.

<sup>18</sup> Representatives of Belgian, Dutch, West German, and Austrian Christian Democratic parties attended. See Szabó, *op. cit.* (2020), 197.

<sup>19</sup> Éva Petrás, 'A magyar kereszténydemokrácia útja Európa szívébe' in Pascal Fontaine, *Út Európa szívébe. A Kereszténydemokrata Képviselőcsoport és az Európai Néppárt története az Európai Parlamentben. Magyar kiegészítés. A magyar kereszténydemokrácia útja Európa szívébe*, ed. Mária Rita Kiss (Budapest: Barankovics István Alapítvány, 2015), 798.

## THE TREVISO CONFERENCE<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to September 1991 and the Italian city of Treviso, where an international conference was organized by the Italian Christian Democratic parties.<sup>21</sup> The meeting was attended by Christian Democratic and People's Party leaders from across the (broadly defined) Central European region.<sup>22</sup> Because both the Slovenian and Croatian prime ministers were present, the discussions naturally centred on the unfolding Yugoslav crisis,<sup>23</sup> and on the role of the constituent republics (or 'national communities'). At the close of the conference, the participants signed a joint declaration calling for strengthened cooperation between regions and states in the area.<sup>24</sup>

## THE PRESENT DOCUMENT

The document published here<sup>25</sup> is the speech delivered in Treviso by László Varga, vice-president of the KDNP. Departing somewhat from the conference's main theme, Varga used his contribution to present the KDNP (and its predecessor, the DNP) from its founding, through its re-establishment, to its principal aims. From an archival point of view, the document has an interesting provenance. It originally surfaced within the papers of the television and radio journalist Imre M. Szabó,<sup>26</sup> which have been preserved at RETÖRKI.<sup>27</sup> However, during a more thorough archival reordering, it became clear that Szabó's papers also contained fragments of the Varga estate. These were separated in 2022 and registered as an independent fond.<sup>28</sup> The speech published here is therefore actually part of Varga's surviving

personal papers. The document consists of five A4 pages, printed in English and clearly structured. The only handwritten addition is a single note on the first page: "Treviso". Because of the lack of further sources, we cannot reconstruct the reason for the thematic divergence between Varga's speech and the official focus of the conference. In one of his reports on a visit to Transylvania,<sup>29</sup> Varga does mention that he prepared a report on the Treviso conference, but no trace of this has been found either in the RETÖRKI holdings or in the Varga papers kept in the KDNP's in-house archive.<sup>30</sup> In that same Transylvanian report, however, Varga writes that in Treviso the role of the provinces (or "national communities") acquired a new significance, and that in his view their influence over the functioning of central governments had grown steadily stronger.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary press reports – though they do not mention Varga by name – reinforce this impression. According to these, the Hungarian delegation included Dr József Horváth, Presidential Commissioner, and Balázs Horváth, Vice-President of the MDF. The former reportedly spoke on regionalism and federalism.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The title of the conference was "The Challenges of Central Europe", as stated in the Italian-language invitation: *Forum della DC del Nord-Est (Treviso, 27-28 settembre 1991) - programma dei lavori sul tema: 'Le sfide dell'Europa Centrale'*.

<sup>21</sup> The conference took place in the Palazzo dei Trecento, located on the Piazza dei Signori. See Győző Papp, 'A köztársasági megbízott külföldi tapasztalatai'. In: *Kisalföld*, 19 November 1991, 1.

<sup>22</sup> I.e. with Polish, Slovak, Slovene, Croatian, German, Austrian, Swiss, and Hungarian participants. Among Central European Christian Democrats, the MDF enjoyed considerable prestige. See *Magyar Nemzet*, 4 October 1991, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Here, the Italian and Austrian delegates urged the prompt recognition of the two republics, while the Swiss and South Tyrolean representatives called for the deployment of armed peacekeeping forces. See L. János László, 'Csurka Prágában, Horváth Olaszországban', *Magyar Hírlap*, 4 October 1990, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Győző Papp, 'A köztársasági megbízott külföldi tapasztalatai', *Kisalföld*, 19 November 1991, 1.

<sup>25</sup> RETÖRKI, Collection XIV.22, *Varga László iratai*, Box 5.

<sup>26</sup> Imre M. Szabó (1941–2018): journalist and documentary filmmaker of Transylvanian origin. From the 1960s he worked as a reporter for Hungarian Radio, later becoming a journalist for *Népszava*. In 1995 he produced a series of portrait and documentary films for Duna Television under the title *American Hungarian Life Stories*, focusing on historically significant figures and witnesses of the Hungarian émigré communities in the United States and Canada. He later worked for *Pesti Hírlap* and continued to prepare reports for Hungarian Radio during the 1990s. He is also known for exposing the forged 'Teller Letter', published in *Népszabadság* during the 2002 parliamentary election campaign. For further details, see: 'Elhunyt M. Szabó Imre', <https://demokrata.hu/magyarorszag/elhunyt-m-szabo-imre-102422/> (accessed: 7 November 2025).

<sup>27</sup> RETÖRKIL XIV. 11. *M. Szabó Imre*.

<sup>28</sup> RETÖRKIL XIV. 22. *Varga László*.

<sup>29</sup> Barnabás Pálkás, '„Éreznék, hogy egyik vagyunk”'. Varga László erdélyi útja', (1991), *Rendszerváltó Szemle* 1 (2021): 63.

<sup>30</sup> This year, among the documents of the KDNP Party Archive curated by RETÖRKI, we identified another portion of Imre M. Szabó's papers, which likewise contains materials related to László Varga. See KDNP Party Archive, Boxes 54 and 55.

<sup>31</sup> Barnabás Pálkás, *op. cit.* (2021), 63.

<sup>32</sup> Győző Papp, 'A köztársasági megbízott külföldi tapasztalatai', *Kisalföld*, 19 November 1991, 1.

The Hungarian Christian Democrat People's Party has strong roots in the Hungarian life, originated from the Christian Democratic Movement, existed and worked between 1935-1946.<sup>33</sup>

The Constitution of the Party was accepted on November 30, 1944 in Budapest in my apartment at Galamb Street 4.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1947 elections, our Party got most of the votes and with 62 members in the Parliament we were largest party.<sup>35</sup>

It is noteworthy to mention that our Party never voted for any law that violated the basic rights of the people. Because of the Communist brutality we had to suspend our activities in February 1949.<sup>36</sup> Our members of the Parliament and the members of the Party, partly left the country<sup>37</sup>, partly were arrested and sentenced<sup>38</sup> and the rest had to live in their country under fear and the oppression, but none of them did anything against our country and none of them served or supported the Communist regime.<sup>39</sup>

In September 1989 our Party started again its activities and after the March 1990 elections we have got 21 members in the Parliament and after the local elections we have 97 mayors and 927 members in the local municipalities and we have 650 local organizations.

Presently our Party membership is five times larger than in March 1990.<sup>40</sup>

Our goal is: now, as a free country with free citizens, become and organic part of Europe – in the European Community – and everybody in Hungary should have equal chances to progress in the political, cultural and economic life.

We are presently participating in the Coalition Government, which has its advantages and disadvantages too.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Here, Varga is referring to movements rooted in Christian social and corporatist thought, grounded in Catholic social teaching – for example, the National Organisation of Catholic Agrarian Youth Associations (KALOT), the Association of Catholic Women and Girls (KALÁSZ), the Parish Workers' Sections (EMSZO), various vocational organizations, and similar groups.

<sup>34</sup> The precise date of the party's founding remains disputed. The date given here reflects László Varga's account; however, most of those involved maintain that the party may already have been established at a meeting held on 13 October. For further details, see Róbert Szabó, 'The Emergence of Modern Christian Democracy in Hungary: A Demokrata Néppárt 1944–1949'. In: *70 éves a Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, ed. István Pálffy (Budapest: Barankovics István Alapítvány, 2014), 11–47.

<sup>35</sup> It was in fact the Hungarian Communist Party that won the most votes in the 1947 parliamentary election – the so-called "blue-slip" election – though this was achieved through various forms of electoral fraud (amendments to the electoral law, manipulation of voter registers, the use of temporary voter lists, and so on).

<sup>36</sup> Mátyás Rákosi sought to use István Barankovics, the leader of the DNP, as a key witness in the Mindszenty trial, and – invoking concerns for the personal safety of his fellow deputies – pressured him into dissolving the party. On 4 February 1949 the DNP Executive Committee (by then operating under the name 'Political Committee') formally adopted the dissolution proposed by Barankovics, although none of its members had any legal authority to do so. For further details, see Róbert Szabó, 'Egy kereszténydemokrata kísérlet Kelet-Közép-Európában, a Demokrata Néppárt (1944–1949)' in Pascal Fontaine, *Út Európa szívébe. A Kereszténydemokrata Képviselőcsoport és az Európai Néppárt története az Európai Parlamentben. Magyar kiegészítés. A magyar kereszténydemokrácia útja Európa szívébe*, ed. Mária Rita Kiss (Budapest: Barankovics István Alapítvány, 2015), 733.

<sup>37</sup> In 1948 László Varga left the country, followed in 1949 by Lajos Pócza, Pál Zoltán, István Barankovics, Ferenc Babóthy, Gyula Belső, György Eszterhás, K. Zoltán Kovács, Miklós Mézes, Ferenc Pethe, and Miklós Villányi; finally, in 1956, János Koczor also went into exile.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the best-known among them were Ferenc Matheovits, a lawyer from Pécs, and Bernát Károlyi, a Franciscan superior. The members of the Democratic People's Party who remained in Hungary could not be manipulated into testifying against the Cardinal in the Mindszenty trial, so Matheovits was charged with leading the political wing of the so-called "Mindszenty conspiracy," while Károlyi was accused of involvement in a military plot and was arrested. For more details, see: Gábor Tabajdi, 'Kereszténydemokraták a pártállami diktatúra idején'. In: *70 éves a Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, ed. István Pálffy (Budapest: Barankovics István Alapítvány, 2014), 49–86.

<sup>39</sup> At this time Varga could not yet have known that the state security services had in fact succeeded in recruiting some DNP politicians as agents. Naturally, examining this issue requires careful, detailed analysis, since – as the most recent research has shown – multiple factors must be taken into account in order to determine who genuinely cooperated. For example, reading through the file of the recruited Sándor Keresztes, he appears far more as a courageous man, faithful to his principles and his faith and anxious for the safety of his family, than as an agent serving the interests of those denouncing his associates.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, the figure was three times higher. During the March–April 1990 parliamentary elections, the KDNP had roughly 3,500 registered members, whereas by September 1991 this number had risen to about 10,500. For more details, see: Róbert Szabó, *A KDNP 1989–1990-ben*, <https://barankovics.hu/a-kdnp-1989-1990-ben/> (accessed: 7 November 2025); and *Tények Könyve 1991*, <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/TenyekKonyve-tenyek-konyve-1/1991-A791/magyar-tarsadalom-politika-C7DC/az-orszaggyules-CA35/parlamenti-partok-CBC8/keresztenydemokrata-neppart-CC01/> (accessed: 7 November 2025).

<sup>41</sup> At this time, László Surján, the president of the KDNP, was serving as Minister of Welfare in the Antall government.

The advantages being that we have chance to build a new country – which I think is the obligatory task of every citizen – the disadvantages, the economical progress is too slow, that of course is the consequence of the former regime, who:

destroyed the free enterprise, poisoned the mind of the people with the non-existent socialism, prevented the citizens to exercise the three basic human rights: freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of association.

### The historical change.

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 was the curtain-raiser when “brotherly” Soviet Union, “the guarantee of security”, showed its true colours, and it became obvious to the world that Central and Eastern Europe was not a peaceful, cooperating socialist camp, but the countries of the region that suffered under the political, military and economic occupation of the Soviet Union. With the appearance of Gorbachev<sup>42</sup> we have witnessed two new phenomena.

1./ It was realized that socialism wasn't functioning,

2./ Neither the countries of Western-Europe nor the United States of America represent any military threat to the Soviet Union.

The first allegation was motivated partly by the Soviet Union's catastrophic situation and the achievements of the European Community. It became clear that it is the free enterprise and not socialism works for the interest and welfare of the people.

Regarding the subject of the CENTRAL EUROPE'S CHALLENGES I would like to say the following:

First that we have tremendous challenges at home and I will mention a few:

a./ Two generations were educated by the communist regime and they were indoctrinated in that the religion is a “opium” and the truth was that the communist ideology turned out as an opium, in order to bring the people from the reality to a dream world of very bad dream,

b./ the youngsters were taught democracy is an imperialist concept, and the truth was that the communist regimes all around the world, without exceptions, were the greatest imperialist who wanted to conquer not only the land but the thinking of the people too,

c./ the people were instructed to believe that socialism is the only road to progress and it turned out that the socialism during the history never, and nowhere existed, it does not exist and will never exist,

d./ for forty years the people had to accept the official statements and had no chance to discuss or to oppose the official theory and as a consequence, they lost their initiatives the participation in the public and in the economic life. The people have existed but never lived in their country, because they never were an organic part of their own land, they never exercised the basic human rights.

We consider that the most significant issue is:

What is our contribution to the development of Western- Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev (1931–2022): the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and later the country's president.

We think that the Hungarian nation with the 1956 Revolution demonstrated that we are not part of the Soviet Union but that we belong to Europe, and we are able to sacrifice to reach that goal and fight for the sake of freedom, as Albert Camus – the French Nobel prize winner – wrote in 1957:

“A decade before 1956 not any nation sacrificed so much for the freedom than the Hungarian freedom fighters.”<sup>43</sup>

We feel what is happening now in Hungary and in the other Central and Eastern European countries including the Soviet Union, are the consequences of the 1956 Revolution.

Few years ago we let the East Germany refugees go to West Germany, and with that we proved that we are working for the united Europe.

Since Hungary is a free and sovereign state we have contributed to the unity of Europe by signing the historical Paris-Charter<sup>44</sup> on November 19, 1990, and we took the obligation as the other 33 nations did, to guarantee to every citizen and national minorities to exercise the basic Human Rights.

On February 15, 1991 the Hungarian Government signed the so called Visegrad Agreement<sup>45</sup> with the Governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia. After many centuries this is the first agreement among the three countries in which they expressed their intention to work together for the United Europe based upon the equality and to respect the universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>46</sup>

This agreement is a cultural, economic and not a security one and presently we don't have any security treaty with any country,<sup>47</sup> but we feel secure because our nation is free, economically independent and culturally strong.

The Hungarian Christian Democratic People's Party has strong ties with all the Christian Democratic parties in Europe and also with the international organizations too.<sup>48</sup> These activities also are a significant contribution to the European Community.

The challenges ahead of us are great, but we take them.

We feel that politically and culturally we were already part of Europe, because even the Iron Curtain couldn't separate our history and culture from Western Europe.

But economically we have a great task to face.

<sup>43</sup> Albert Camus wrote *The Blood of the Hungarians* in Paris in October 1957, and the quotation is taken from that text.

<sup>44</sup> On 1 December 1990, the member states of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) signed the document entitled *The Paris Charter for a New Europe*. In it, they welcomed the end of Europe's division and reaffirmed the principles adopted in Helsinki in 1975, thereby committing themselves to the protection of human and civil liberties – including the identity of (national) minorities – as well as to the defence of democracy and the rule of law. For further details, see: 'Párizsi Charta az Új Európáért (Extracts)', *Regio – Kisebbségtudományi Szemle* 2 (1991): 208–211.

<sup>45</sup> A form of cooperation established between Poland, Czechoslovakia (from 1 January 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and Hungary, whose aims included: the restoration of independence, democracy, and freedom; the dismantling of the social, economic, and intellectual structures of the totalitarian system; the establishment of parliamentary democracy and a modern rule-of-law state; respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; the creation of a modern market economy; and full integration into Europe's political, economic, security, and legislative systems. For further details, see: Róbert Jónás, 'Harmincéves a visegrádi együttműködés', *RETÖRKI Kronológia*, <https://retorki.hu/hirek/harminceves-a-visegradi-egyuttmukodes> (accessed: 7 November 2025).

<sup>46</sup> A thirty-article declaration adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948, expressing its position on the fundamental rights to which every human being is entitled. The full text of the declaration is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english> (accessed: 7 November 2025).

<sup>47</sup> By this time Hungary was no longer a member of the Warsaw Pact: the Pact's military structure had been dissolved on 1 April 1991, and its political body on 1 July 1991. Hungary would not become a full member of NATO until 12 March 1999. For further details, see: Csaba Békés, 'Magyarország és a Varsói szerződés felbomlása (1988–1991)', in *A nemzetközi rendszer alakváltozásai a 21. Század elején. Tanulmányok Rostoványi Zsolt 70. születésnapja alkalmából*, eds. László Csicsmann and Ágnes Kemenszky (Budapest: *Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem*, 2022), 11–24.

<sup>48</sup> See footnotes 15 and 16.

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We want to remind the distinguished participants of this Conference, that economically we have to start from the beginning, even further, because we have clear factories, enterprises, the land from the burden of the last 40 years.

I came to a country<sup>49</sup> where everybody was an employee of the State, even the barbershop was nationalized. But it is worst, that even the mind of the people was also nationalized.

But the work has been started and the people will gradually realize that it is not enough to build a new concept where the free man takes the driver seat.

We feel that we are contributing-according to our possibilities to the European Community, but we expect from Western Europe to contribute its economic help to us in order to accelerate our progress. We also need a new security system, which helps to save our sovereignty.

This Conference has a very unique importance in the history of Europe:

A few weeks ago in the Soviet Union President Gorbachev issued, with the signature of Mr. Yeltsin<sup>50</sup>, the death certificate of the communist regime. It died, not heroically rather of a long illness of socialism.

The socialism was unable to compete with free enterprises that created the European Community, which in 1945 it was an utopian dream. Today, a reality.

Our firm belief is that the creation, the work, the progress and the results of the European Community eliminated the communist system in the Soviet Union.

It is a great chance in front of us, especially for the Christian Democratic Parties in Europe, to enter with their concept, program and plan into the liberated Soviet Union.

## THE TREVISO SPEECH

(27–28 September 1991)

Prepared by Dr László Varga, Deputy Chairman

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<sup>49</sup> László Varga first returned to Hungary in 1989, and in 1992 he moved back permanently, bringing his life in New York to a close.

<sup>50</sup> Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin (1931–2007): the first democratically elected President of Russia, serving from 1991 to 1999.

Barnabás Pálinkás

# The Return of the Documents of Journalist József Szilágyi

## Sources of Hungarian Emigration in the Collection of RETÖRKI



The 2.5 linear metres of documents belonging to the journalist József Szilágyi returned home under adventurous circumstances. The Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change, which primarily conducts research on the history of the regime change in Hungary and the preceding periods, and collects private documents, came into contact with the widow of József Szilágyi because of some lost letters of her late husband.<sup>1</sup>

The elderly lady contacted our Archives by phone in 2019 to ask for the return of a few dozen documents of her late husband, which had been placed to our custody via a bequest from historian Károly Vigh.<sup>2</sup> It soon became clear that the deceased husband was not the same person as the József Szilágyi<sup>3</sup> who was prosecuted alongside Prime Minister Imre Nagy but was convicted and executed before him and, on 16 June 1989, at one of the symbolic events of the Hungarian regime change, was reburied. The author of the letters was in fact a journalist who had worked from abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Searching for the name of his widow, who also came from Hungary, it turned out that a detail of her life was revealed a few years ago: North Korean United Nations diplomats serving in Geneva in 1987 had asked Erzsébet Szilágyi-Hermann to teach special therapeutic massage in Korea. However, it turned out only shortly before the departure that the destination was not Seoul but Pyongyang, and the task awaiting her was to help the General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Il Sung,

recover. Erzsébet was successful and returned to Switzerland, and in the post-1989 period regularly visited Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

This contact was followed by a long period of confidence-building research work – meetings, conversations, and the recording of oral history interviews – in order to persuade the widow that the preserved documents were of special importance for the history of Hungarians in exile and should be kept in a Hungarian collection. The trials of the past can certainly explain why an émigré or his or her legal heir might be distrustful of a collection from their native country, since – as in our case as well – the person in question presumably left it not by intention or for the sake of adventure but for political reasons. This story ended successfully: Erzsébet Szilágyi-Hermann, who lived alternately in Switzerland and Hungary, left the documents to RETÖRKI Archives in her will, so 35 years after the death of József Szilágyi, in 2022 the documents were transferred to Hungary.

Although Szilágyi is not among the most famous figures in the history of émigré Hungarians, his adventurous life, extensive network of contacts, and surviving correspondence may make him significant for research into the history of this community. József Szilágyi was born in 1896 in Győr. His father, Vilmos Szilágyi, was the director of the *Magyar Színház* (Hungarian Theatre), then of the *Vígszínház* (Comedy Theatre), and was later president of the Hungarian Actors' Association, while his mother,

<sup>1</sup> I would like to take thank Balázs Ablonczy and Gergely Fejérdy for their assistance in determining the historical value of Szilágyi's legacy.

<sup>2</sup> Vigh, Károly (1918–2013): historian. Founder and first president (1986–1989) of the Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Baráti Társaság [Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Friendship Society], which he represented at the National Round Table Talks [Nemzeti Kerekasztal-tárgyalások] in 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Szilágyi, József (1917–1958): lawyer, communist politician. Between 1947 and 1949, he was head of the security department at the Communist Party (MKP, MDP) headquarters, but later became a critic of the regime. On 22 October 1956 he spoke at a student assembly at the Technical University, then served as secretary to Prime Minister Imre Nagy, for which he was sentenced to death and executed in 1958 during the Imre Nagy trial. On 16 June 1989, Szilágyi's coffin was also laid out at the reburial ceremony held at Heroes' Square. After the commemoration, he was laid to rest in plot 301 of the Új köztemető [New Public Cemetery].

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see: Pálinkás, Barnabás: Történelmi hagyaték történésszemmel. A Vigh Károly-hagyaték ismertetése. *Rendszerváltó Archívum*, 2019/3. 49–61.

<sup>5</sup> Szilágyi-Herman, Erzsébet – Bod, Péter: *Barátom Kim Ir Szen*. Budapest, Szépművés, 2017.

Etelka Koch, was a popular downtown fashion designer and hat-maker, so József Szilágyi spent his youth in the vibrant cultural environment of Budapest after the turn of the century. Family documents from the bequest also give an insight into assimilated upper-middle-class Jewish life in this period. After his voluntary front-line service in the First World War, he could not finish his studies at the Faculty of Law due to the *numerus clausus*,<sup>6</sup> so he tried his hand at journalism in Vienna and Berlin, but succeeded finally in Paris, and it was from there that he sent reports to the journals of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, such as *Kis Újság*, *Előre*, and *Szabadság* from 1930 onwards.

In August 1939 he took part in organizing Hungarian broadcasts on French Radio, and worked as an editor until the German invasion. During the Second World War he was in close contact with different resistance groups, then in 1942 he fled to Switzerland and sent reports to various journals. In 1977 he was awarded the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur* [National Order of the Legion of Honour] for his contribution to the French resistance. In addition to his work as a journalist, during and after the war he maintained an extensive correspondence with Western politicians, diplomats, and artists, especially those in France and Switzerland. We should mention his relationship with Georges Duhamel,<sup>7</sup> a doctor, writer, and academician, who was known as a friend and translator of Dezső Kosztolányi.<sup>8</sup>

He was closely linked to many members of the Hungarian political community in exile, including Pál Ignóty,<sup>9</sup> the son of the founder of the famous journal *Nyugat* and Gyula Dessewffy<sup>10</sup>, the head of *Kis Újság*, a significant representative



In 1977 József Szilágyi was awarded the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*. Photo: HU-RETÖRKIL XIV.24. Documents of József Szilágyi

of post-1945 resistance abroad, and the first head of the Hungarian Department of Radio Free Europe. His correspondence with the leaders of the Independent Smallholders' Party and several outstanding personalities related to the party, such as former President of the Republic Zoltán Tildy,<sup>11</sup> former Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy,<sup>12</sup> former Minister for Public Services János Erőss<sup>13</sup>, Ambassador to Paris Pál Auer,<sup>14</sup> and former Mayor of Budapest József Kővágó,<sup>15</sup> may prove an important

<sup>6</sup> Numerus clausus [Latin] literally means 'closed number' and refers to a regulation that limits the number of people who can be admitted to a given body or institution according to a specific criterion. In Hungary, Act XXV of 1920 on 'the regulation of enrolment in universities, technical universities, the Faculty of Economics at the University of Budapest, and law schools', commonly known as 'numerus clausus', came into force on 26 September 1920. Its implementing regulations revealed that one of the aims of the law was to reduce the number of Jewish students, who were traditionally overrepresented.

<sup>7</sup> Duhamel, Georges (1884–1966): French doctor, academician, writer, and poet.

<sup>8</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső (1885–1936): writer, poet, translator, and one of the greatest figures of twentieth-century Hungarian prose and poetry.

<sup>9</sup> Ignóty, Pál (1901–1978): publicist, writer, editor, and son of Hugó Ignóty, founder of *Nyugat* magazine.

<sup>10</sup> Dessewffy, Gyula (1909–2000): politician, journalist, editor-in-chief of *Kis Újság*, then employee of Radio Free Europe.

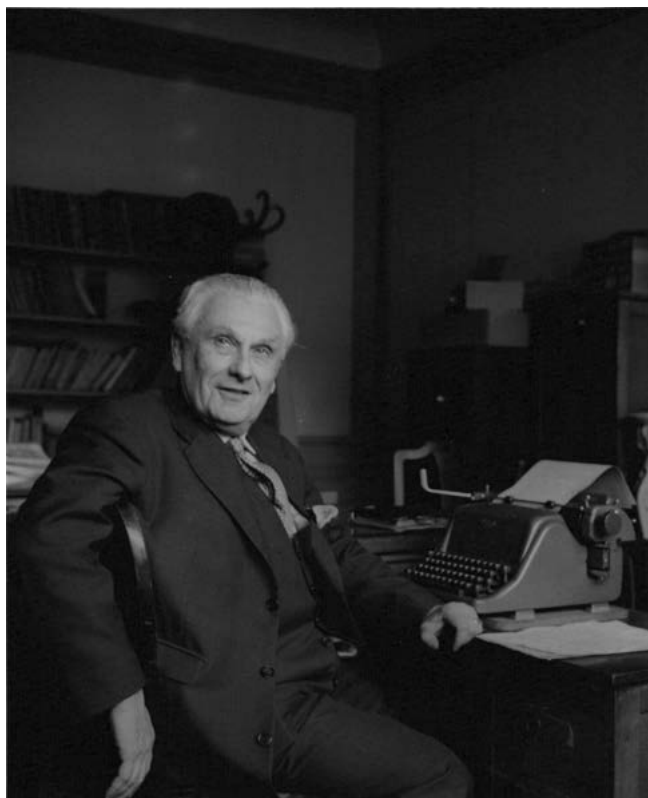
<sup>11</sup> Tildy, Zoltán (1889–1961): Reformed pastor and politician. He served as Prime Minister of Hungary from 1945 to 1946 and as President of Hungary from 1946 to 1948. During the 1956 revolution, he was Minister of State in Imre Nagy's government, for which he was imprisoned from 1958 to 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Nagy, Ferenc (1903–1979): politician, president of the Független Kisgazda-, Földmunkás- és Polgári Párt [Independent Smallholders, Agricultural Workers and Civic Party]. He served as Prime Minister of Hungary from 1946 to 1947. In 1947, while on leave in Switzerland, he was forced to resign and was not allowed to return to Hungary. He lived in the US until his death.

<sup>13</sup> Erőss, János (1889–1962): lawyer and politician. He served as Minister for Public Services in 1947.

<sup>14</sup> Auer, Pál (1885–1978): lawyer, diplomat. Hungarian ambassador to France from 1946 to 1947.

<sup>15</sup> Kővágó, József (1913–1996): military officer, engineer, and politician. He served as mayor of Budapest from 1945 to 1947.



József Szilágyi (1896–1987), journalist. Photo: HU-RETÖRKIL XIV.24. Documents of József Szilágyi

source for researchers. His correspondence with Ferenc Kapocs,<sup>16</sup> the secretary to Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy is very extensive and historically significant. His correspondence with Ferenc Honti,<sup>17</sup> one of the founders of *Le Monde Diplomatique* can also be considered unique.

In April 1946 he came back to Hungary to visit his mother, but before he could return to France, the political police arrested him on the grounds of his Western connections, and he was released only with the help of his political connections. In October 1946 he left Hungary. From then until 1961 he lived and worked in Paris, then he moved to Switzerland where he married Erzsébet Hermann, who had left Hungary after 1956. József Szilágyi continued his work as a correspondent and died in Lausanne on 17 June 1987, at the age of 91.

József Szilágyi's legacy forms an integral part of the written sources left by public or cultural figures who lived in the Hungarian émigré community in France in the twentieth century, such as the bequests of György Bakách-Besseney<sup>18</sup> in the National Archive of Hungary (HU-MNL-OL-P 2066), or those of Ferenc Fejtő<sup>19</sup> and Tamás Schreiber,<sup>20</sup> who had important French connections as well, and which were transferred to Fehérváracsurgó. The editorial correspondence of the *Irodalmi Újság*<sup>21</sup> in Paris, preserved in the Petőfi Literary Museum, may also be mentioned here.

After the regime change the legacies of only some of the Hungarian public figures of the twentieth century who were forced to emigrate could be saved. There are many whose legacy was destroyed or was not placed in public archives either because the family did not think it valuable or did not want to hand it over to a Hungarian or foreign public institution, or the documents were lost because there was no heir. In rare cases the storage conditions do not allow the documents to be made public because they are so damaged as to have become unusable. Although there were and are several state-funded programmes – the Mikes Kelemen Programme initiated by the Diaspora Council and run by the National Széchényi Library must be highlighted – that seek to collect the family legacies important to Hungarian historical memory, few of these document collections find their way into public institutions and archives and become accessible to historians.<sup>22</sup>

If we do not count the most recent departures to the West, we are facing our last chance to save the material and written heritage of those forced to emigrate. In this work, the second and third generation of heirs have a serious responsibility, though they have often been separated from the Hungarian cultural community and may not be aware of the historical importance of their inheritance for the motherland. Additionally,

<sup>16</sup> Kapocs, Ferenc (1920–1977): lawyer and civil servant. Between 1946 and 1947, he was secretary to Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy and head of the Prime Minister's Office.

<sup>17</sup> Honti, Ferenc [François Honti] (1900–1974): diplomat, journalist, and one of the founders of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

<sup>18</sup> Bakách-Besseney, György (1892–1959): politician and diplomat. From 1938, he was Hungary's ambassador to Belgrade, from 1941 to Vichy, and from 1943 to Bern. He acted as a mediator between Hungary and the Allies. After World War II, he lived in the United States.

<sup>19</sup> Fejtő, Ferenc [François Fejtő] (1909–2008): French–Hungarian writer, critic, and social democratic publicist.

<sup>20</sup> Schreiber, Tamás [Thomas Schreiber] (1929–2015) was a French publicist, journalist, and political scientist of Hungarian origin. He left Hungary in 1949, then became *Le Monde's* correspondent in Budapest from 1956, reporting on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

<sup>21</sup> *Irodalmi Újság*: A Hungarian weekly literary and cultural policy magazine launched in 1950, published by the Hungarian Writers' Association. After 1956, it became an émigré newspaper, published in Paris between 1962 and 1989.

<sup>22</sup> For further details, see: Arany, Krisztina: A levéltári hungarikakutatás helyzete, feladatai és lehetőségei a Magyar Nemzeti Levéltárban. *Levéltári Szemle*, 2019/1, 5–20; Arany, Krisztina: Levéltári iratjándékozások a Mikes Kelemen Program keretében – a levéltári koordináció első két évének tapasztalatai. *Turul*, 2017/2, 104–107.

historians and archivists have a very serious responsibility to find them and, by earning their trust, to convince the custodians of the documents to place them in a collection. However, despite all efforts, this generally happens more due to luck or chance.

Unfortunately, research on the history of the Hungarian émigré community has faced huge underinvestment in Hungary, even though, as a proportion of the Hungarian national community, the various emigration waves moved masses of people similar to the Italian or Polish diasporas. Hungarian historians have already presented partial results and important research,<sup>23</sup> but a modern monographic treatment of the history of the emigrated part of the nation is yet to be produced (the last major work<sup>24</sup> on this topic was undertaken by Gyula Borbándi<sup>25</sup>), and there is also a lack of publications based on thorough research work concerning important people, institutions, and organizations.

Our collection, the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Hungarian Regime Change, as a public private archive, essentially collects the private documents of Hungarian figures of public and/or cultural life, as well as of legal entities (associations, parties). However, due to the specific features of Hungarian history in the twentieth

century, in many cases documents related to émigré history can also be found, such as the papers of Sándor Püski<sup>26</sup> who ran a Hungarian publishing house in New York, those of the Christian Democrat lawyer-politician László Varga<sup>27</sup> who fled to the USA, or the Viennese journalist György Haas,<sup>28</sup> or the most recent addition to our collection, the legacy of Franciscan monk Géza Bertalan Fekete.<sup>29</sup> It is important to mention that the founder of our Archives, Sándor Lezsák<sup>30</sup> and the Népfőiskola Alapítvány [People's College Foundation] in Lakitelek established by him has an Emigration Collection which preserves, among others, the documents of the Európai Magyar Gimnázium [European Hungarian Grammar School]<sup>31</sup> which operated in Kastl, Bavaria, between 1957 and 2006.

Taking the above into consideration, the Szilágyi legacy may be of interest to researchers because of his family background, his adventurous life, his relations with influential members of several waves of émigrés (groups between the two World Wars, after 1945, after 1948/49, and after 1956) and the documents related to the organizations he founded (for example the Association of Free Hungarian Journalists) and his workplaces (for example the Hungarian editorial office of the French Radio).

<sup>23</sup> Handbook by Béla Nóvé or the publications of my colleague, Zoltán Nagymihály concerning the functioning of the journal *Új Látóhatár* [New Horizon] can be mentioned here. For further details, see: Nóvé, Béla: *Magyar emigrációtörténeti kézikönyv*. Budapest, OSZK, 202.; Nagymihály, Zoltán: A „szellem szuverenitása” az emigrációban: A Látóhatár és az Új Látóhatár „harmadik útja” (1950–1962). In: Heil, Kristóf Mihály (ed.): *Szemelvények a magyar emigráció történetéből*. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2024, 180–194.

<sup>24</sup> Borbándi, Gyula: *A magyar emigráció életrajza 1945–1985. I-II*. Bern, Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Borbándi, Gyula (1919–2014): writer and editor. He fled Hungary in 1949 for political reasons. Between 1951 and 1984, he worked for Radio Free Europe, and between 1951 and 1958 he was the editor and then editor-in-chief of *Látóhatár* [Horizon], one of the most important Hungarian émigré magazines, and from 1958 to 1990, he was the editor-in-chief of the journal, which was renamed *Új Látóhatár* [New Horizon].

<sup>26</sup> Püski, Sándor (1911–2009): lawyer, book publisher. In 1939, he founded the *Magyar Élet* publishing house, which was nationalized in 1950. In 1943, he was one of the main organizers of the Szárszód meeting. He emigrated to the United States with his wife in 1970, where he opened a Hungarian bookstore. His company, *Püski Kiadó*, founded in 1975, was one of the most important publishers of the Hungarian émigré community. He returned to Budapest in 1989 and moved the publishing house back home as well.

<sup>27</sup> Varga, László (1910–2003): politician, lawyer, and writer. Between 1947 and 1948, he was a member of the Hungarian parliament for the Demokrata Néppárt (DNP) [Democratic People's Party]. He left Hungary in 1948. He settled first in Switzerland, then in New York, where he opened a law office. In 1953, he became one of the founders of the Szabad Magyar Jogászok Világszövetsége [World Federation of Free Hungarian Lawyers], of which he was president from 1956 to 1990, and he also founded the Magyar Színház és Művész Egyesület [Hungarian Theater and Artists Association] in New York. He returned to Hungary in 1989 and participated in the organization of the Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP) [Christian Democratic People's Party], the successor party to the DNP. From 1994 to 1997, he was a member of parliament for the KDNP, and from 1997 until his death, he was a member of parliament for Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – FIDESZ [Alliance of Young Democrats].

<sup>28</sup> Haas, György (1933–2014): writer and journalist. In 1965, he settled in Vienna, where he worked as an art dealer and was a correspondent for *Radio Free Europe*. His writings appeared in *Irodalmi Újság*, *Magyar Híradó* in Vienna, *Új Látóhatár*, *Katolikus Szemle*, *Kanadai Magyarosság*, and *Bécsi Napló*. In 1990, he became foreign policy advisor to the Független Kisgazdapárt [Independent Smallholders Party].

<sup>29</sup> Fekete, Géza Bertalan, OFM (1913–2006): Franciscan monk. After the Second World War, he worked in Germany, founding schools and newspapers and organizing and directing various relief efforts.

<sup>30</sup> Lezsák, Sándor (1949–): poet, teacher, and politician. He is one of the founders of the Magyar Demokrata Fórum [Hungarian Democratic Forum] and a member of the Hungarian National Assembly. Since 2006, he has been one of the vice-presidents of the National Assembly. He is a corresponding member of the Magyar Művészeti Akadémia [Hungarian Academy of Arts].

<sup>31</sup> Európai Magyar Gimnázium [European Hungarian High School] was a Hungarian-language secondary school operating from 1957 to 2006 in Kastl, Germany (Kastl in der Oberpfalz, Bavaria).

Adrienn P. Holl

# International Research and Trends in Collection Care in Light of the Challenges Posed by Climate Change



## MODELLING MUSEUM CLIMATE AND INSECT PESTS, FUNGAL GROWTH

Over the past two decades, evidence has been mounting that climate change degrades and endangers our cultural heritage. Across Europe, Hungary included, we can observe the destruction that climate change is wreaking on our buildings and our museum collections. An increasing number of international research projects are examining how climate change is affecting both organic and inorganic collections, and how we can prevent and mitigate the damage to collections caused by climatic changes.

Research, however, remains incomplete, and the implementation of protective measures is fragmented both domestically and internationally. It was around these issues that this year's international scientific conference in Vienna, held under the title 'Climate Change in Museums', was organized. The conference highlighted the conservation challenges outlined below, to which a response is likewise needed at the national level.

Optimal collection-care guidelines for the preservation, display, storage, and transport of cultural heritage are crucial – not only for minimizing damage to artworks and documents, but also for ensuring their long-term preservation and accessibility to future generations. In recent years, as the climate crisis has intensified, increasing attention has been paid to the fact that acceptable annual climate ranges for collection storage have been relaxed. The aim of this change is to make public collections' use of resources more sustainable, while the primary task for archives and museums remains the continuous monitoring and supervision of conditions for the care of collections.

Public collections face a dual economic challenge, having to balance the operational costs of their buildings on the one hand, and the fluctuating but steadily rising cost of energy on the other. Climate-control systems account for the majority of energy consumption in museums and archives, and are often four to six times higher than in conventional office buildings.

A promising solution in this regard comes from the Danish pilot project on 'Sustainable Climate Control', which examined how to balance collection-care requirements with reduced energy use. Based on the findings of an 18-month collaboration involving ten museums, the project estimates that institutions could reduce their overall energy consumption by 10–50 per cent, in many cases without the need for major – and therefore costly – technical investments. Key measures include shutting systems down overnight, adopting more targeted and slightly broader storage climate parameters, and strengthening cooperation between conservation departments and building-services engineering teams.

These insights have led to the development of a new training module entitled 'Sustainable Collection Management'. The course enables museum, archival, and library professionals to assess and balance – using a data-driven, interdisciplinary approach – the preservation needs of their collections with the institution's energy consumption. Participants work with exercises drawn from their own collections and, over the course of the training, learn how to develop tailored management strategies, conservation protocols, and practical solutions aimed at reducing the energy use associated with their specific holdings. The sustainable collection-management course highlights the essential link between risk-based conservation thinking and

feasible energy planning. In practice, sustainable solutions are always context-specific and must be anchored in each institution's established collection-care guidelines.

According to a study by the Getty Conservation Institute, several factors currently hinder the development of sustainable environmental-management strategies within cultural institutions. These include: the absence of risk analyses addressing climate-change-related damage to artworks and documents; incomplete assessments of energy consumption in museum and archival buildings; and a lack of positive, sustainable institutional models within the sector. Institutions also often lack cost-benefit analyses that weigh archival-security risks against the distribution of available resources.

Over the past twenty years, numerous low-energy museum documentation center facilities have been built in Denmark, often serving as shared collection repositories. This approach is known as the 'Danish model'. Its common features are: no installed heating or cooling systems, and well-insulated buildings that operate with minimal air exchange and mechanical dehumidification. These technical solutions provide a very stable indoor climate which, for most of the year, remains cool and maintains a high TWPI (Time-Weighted Preservation Index). The energy required to sustain such conditions is minimal – less than 3 kWh per cubic metre of storage space per year. This is roughly ten times lower than the energy use of conventional HVAC-operated storage buildings.

In addition, a full life-cycle analysis (LCA) has been performed for the construction and operation of these facilities. Over a fifty-year horizon, the total annual carbon footprint of a typical Danish low-energy storage building is between 6 and 8 kg CO<sub>2</sub> per square metre. This places it within the 'sustainable building' category under Danish building regulations. For cultural institutions in Hungary, the first step may be to gain a clear understanding of LCA assessments and sustainable climate control. A CO<sub>2</sub> balance helps evaluate emissions, identify opportunities for reduction, and establish priorities for climate-neutral operation. Introducing carbon-footprint accounting into the museum, library, and archival sectors will require a new mindset from everyone involved.

Over the past two decades, insect species originating from the Mediterranean have been identified with increasing frequency in Central Europe. Owing to global warming, living conditions at temperate latitudes have now become suitable for species native to the Mediterranean region. The transport of museum objects and archival documents between museums, archives, and cultural institutions – especially across continental borders – can be particularly dangerous. Museums and archives must not underestimate the appearance of new insect species that develop in dry organic materials of animal or plant origin.

The grey silverfish (*Ctenolepisma longicaudatum*) was first detected in Austria in 2001 and in Germany in 2007. Today it is the most widespread species of silverfish in Central Europe and causes significant damage in museums, archives, and libraries. The ghost silverfish (*Ctenolepisma calvum*) has also spread rapidly in recent years and is by far the most common pest species in Austria. To prevent the entry of insect pests, wooden pallets, corrugated-cardboard boxes, and loose packaging materials must not be brought into museum buildings. Incoming exhibition objects and documents must be inspected on arrival from a collection-care perspective. Ideally, quarantine rooms should be used, where newly arrived materials can be stored for 2–4 weeks while conservators continuously check for infestation. Insect development is also influenced by changing weather and climate conditions. For many species, daily temperature fluctuations are a stronger determinant of behaviour than changes in relative humidity. Insect pests represent one of the greatest threats to our collections. With effective Integrated Pest Management (IPM) monitoring, we could target pest-control interventions more rapidly and manage infestations far more effectively.

The use of insecticidal disinfectants (pesticides) in the preservation of cultural property goes back more than 150 years. A wide range of disinfectants has been employed to protect and preserve ethnographic objects and artworks in museum collections from pest infestations. In the context of climate change, however, these previously treated objects now pose significant health risks both to the environment and to humans. Many disinfectants release toxic chemical compounds into the air as they break down over time. Arsenic, mercury, copper compounds, PCP, DDT, and lindane degrade more rapidly as temperatures

rise and relative humidity increases. Those most at risk are object handlers and collection-care professionals who work in direct contact with cultural materials that were treated long ago with now-toxic substances.

Certain mould species – typically present in these relatively dry indoor environments – have specifically adapted to grow at lower moisture levels, posing new challenges for preventive conservation in museums and archives. The Austrian ‘ALCALDE’ project seeks to improve our understanding of how climate change affects pests (both insects and fungi) in museums, libraries, and archives. The project collects *in situ* data on insects, moulds, and climate conditions in Austrian heritage institutions in order to determine the mathematical relationships between outdoor and indoor climate variables and the number and activity of pests. The results will be used to develop projections for future populations of typical museum and archival pests based on the latest climate-change scenarios.

Last year, on 14–15 May, I had the opportunity to participate in the international scientific conference Omics & Heritage (O&H) in Rome, held under the title ‘*Metagenomes and Microbiomes for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology*’. In recent years, new biological metagenomic analyses have been used to identify microbial communities responsible for deterioration. These studies examined the microbiological communities inhabiting cultural-heritage documents, objects, and buildings, thereby providing new insights into the biological degradation processes affecting heritage collections. The composition of bacterial communities is determined by microclimatic conditions and by the nature of the substrates on which they grow.

For these investigations, terahertz (THz) spectroscopy serves as a complementary, non-destructive, and mobile analytical approach. However, spectral data for materials that cause degradation are still lacking. THz diagnostics in the field of heritage conservation could prove crucial for expanding existing datasets and for enabling experimental disinfection studies. For this reason, the conference in Rome presented important data on the specific THz spectra of solid compounds relevant to cultural heritage. The identification of volatile organic compounds

(VOCs) using THz spectroscopy offers a means of detecting selective markers for fungal growth and decay processes.

The future lies in establishing a ‘green conservation strategy’ for eliminating biological deterioration. Essential oils such as *Origanum vulgare* L. and *Thymus vulgaris* L., whose chemical composition has been characterized by GC–MS analysis, may serve as suitable disinfectants for mould-infested archaeological materials. Since 2019, 10% essential-oil solutions of *Thymus vulgaris* L. and *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill. (EOs) have been successfully applied to phototrophic biofilms isolated from the Roman catacombs, where the plant-based disinfectants caused no visible alterations to the painted wall surfaces.

For the long-term preservation of cultural heritage, it is essential to involve researchers from the biological sciences – microbiologists and chemists in particular – in archival conservation work. Unfortunately, only minimal biochemical research has been carried out in Hungary in the archival and library fields over recent decades. At the same time, the rapid development of green chemistry and of the biological and chemical sciences is increasingly supporting the work of professionals engaged in collection care.

Last year, the 32nd International ICARUS Conference was held in Novi Sad at the Archives of Vojvodina, under the title ‘*Archives and Research in the Analog and Digital Space*’. For the first time, the organizers included a dedicated collection-care section: ‘The Conservation and Restoration of Paper and Parchment’. As a collection-care specialist representing RETÖRKI, I presented the completed V4 preservation project. The EU-supported initiative, entitled ‘Preserving and Safeguarding the Written Cultural Heritage of the Visegrad Countries’, brought together Polish biologists, Czech chemists, and Slovak and Hungarian paper engineers. Their combined expertise and teamwork resulted in the creation of a five-language professional conservation glossary and a general emergency protocol. These freely accessible, downloadable materials continue to support the work of archivists, conservators, bookbinders, cultural managers, and technical staff across public collections. In emergency situations, the protocol – used alongside an institution’s own disaster plan – prepares us to carry out the professional

rescue of documents and collections in the event of a sudden catastrophe.

In 2022, the National Library of Prague purchased a Nebula disinfection machine for books and documents, and I had the opportunity to examine its operation on site. The aim of the professional visit was to evaluate the machine's functioning and effectiveness. The Nebula is a semi-automatic device designed to disinfect paper-based materials, including documents, books, newspapers, magazines, and folders. During the disinfection process it uses a quaternary ammonium compound (QAC) – in this case a mixture of benzalkonium chloride and distilled water – to halt the spread of bacteria, moulds, and viruses. The disinfectant is mildly toxic and has a negative impact on biodiversity. Its original pH is acidic, and since the metabolic by-products produced by moulds are also typically acidic, its use raises further concerns when treating severely degraded, fragile paper materials. The acidity of the disinfectant and that of already acidic documents combine, causing cellulose molecules to break down under the action of organic acids – in other words, the mechanical strength of documents and books decreases.

At the Prague National Film Archive, I studied the examination and treatment of mould contamination in the audiovisual collection during a professional study visit. The film vaults and the storage areas for posters and paper materials are climate-controlled and located below ground level. During climate control, incoming air is pre-treated and cleaned using physical filtration systems. Because maintaining stable humidity is more difficult in underground storage, mobile dehumidifiers have been added to help maintain optimal relative humidity levels. The storage areas also undergo continuous monitoring of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) and regular sampling for specific gases (nitrogen dioxide, acetic acid).

In the audiovisual collection, measurements of formaldehyde levels, readings from the installed AD Strip indicators, and the pH values of the films are all recorded in digital spreadsheets spanning several years. On the basis of external and internal environmental values and pH results, PI and TWPI values are also determined for polyester and acetate films stored in the repository.

Mould-contaminated films, documents, and posters are tested using a Lumitester measuring device, which detects ATP (adenosine triphosphate), an indicator characteristic of living organisms. Contaminated films are disinfected in an automated machine: isopropyl alcohol is poured into the machine's tank, after which the device automatically washes the film with isopropyl alcohol and dries it in a sealed chamber. Previously, a different machine used a toxic chemical containing toluene, but as the production of toluene-based substances is no longer permitted, the archive has switched to isopropyl-alcohol-based disinfection.

## CONCLUSION

Participation in scientific conferences and professional study visits enables the kind of knowledge transfer that is essential for specialists working in all fields. Available funding streams, grants, and accredited training courses provide opportunities to align Hungarian practice with international research in collection care. A good example is the ongoing SAGA project (Sustainable Archives and Greener Approaches), in which the Hungarian National Archives is a partner. As part of the project, microbiological sampling has been carried out in the Archives' conservation studio, research room, and storage areas. By evaluating the results and comparing them with international standards, we can achieve substantial progress in preventive conservation in Hungary as well.

# The Middle Kingdoms

**Martyn Rady: *A New History of Central Europe. From the Roman Empire to Post-Communism*. Budapest, Helikon, 2025.**

Published in 2025, the Hungarian edition of British historian Martyn Rady's *A New History of Central Europe. From the Roman Empire to Post-Communism* offers an ambitious and sweeping account of two millennia of the region's history. Translated by Péter Papolczy and issued by Helikon Publishing, the book originally appeared in 2023 under Penguin Books. Spanning nearly 600 pages, it is divided into evenly sized chapters, each followed by a thematically organised list of recommended readings and a comprehensive bibliography. Particularly striking is the cover image, based on Károly Telepy's *Landscape with Ruins* – subtly reimagined so that, above the desolate medieval castle, fighter planes drop their bombs. The composition powerfully encapsulates the defeat of empires: an apt visual metaphor for the book's central theme.

Comprising thirty-four chapters of fifteen to twenty pages each, Rady's narrative stretches from ancient Rome to the dawn of the twenty-first century. Before turning to its substance, it is worth asking: what, in Rady's view, defines Central Europe? Geographically, the region extends from the Rhine to the Carpathians and from the Baltic in the north across the German Plain to the Balkan Range in the south. Politically, it has encompassed everything from empires to a multitude of small states; today, roughly a dozen countries fall wholly or partially within its scope. The historical frameworks of the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg realms of Austria and Hungary, and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth together delineate the core area under discussion.

The author of this review wishes to stress at the outset that the following remarks do not attempt a detailed or exhaustive account of the volume – both for reasons of space and because the reviewer's expertise lies chiefly in certain aspects of twentieth-century regional history.

Rady's treatment of the earlier periods, up to the dawn of the twentieth century, is especially engaging. Whereas much historical writing privileges political narrative, Rady uses politics as a structural guide rather than an interpretative focus. His chronological framework serves as the backbone for a wide range

of disciplinary approaches. The Roman era is thus explored largely through literary and cultural history; the age of Charlemagne through ecclesiastical and administrative history. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, the analysis of myth and legend plays a key role, alongside genealogical inquiry into rulers and elites and detailed discussions of historical geography.

Genealogy, however, is not Rady's only auxiliary science: historical genetics also finds a place in his account, particularly in relation to ethnic groups. The book draws upon an impressive spectrum of perspectives – social and economic history above all, but also, though less extensively, cultural and religious history, literary and constitutional history, urban and industrial history, historiography, etymology, the history of philosophy, and even prosopography and diplomatic or military history. Particularly memorable is Rady's foray into the social history of consumption, exemplified by his discussion of beer drinking. The resulting panorama of rise and decline, creation and destruction, unfolds not merely through names, places, and dates, but through carefully reconstructed processes, enriched with maps and literary excerpts.

Rady's central thesis is that Central Europe fell behind Western Europe after the Middle Ages (418). This relative backwardness, he argues, rendered the region particularly vulnerable to the devastation of the First World War and its aftermath. He identifies two major points at which Europe's map was redrawn – after 1815 and after 1920 – and interprets the latter as a turning point, driven by the rise of nationalism. The “just peace” envisioned after the Great War, he concludes, proved illusory: rather than homogeneous nation-states, what emerged were multiethnic polities burdened by internal tensions. Among these, the fragmentation of the Hungarian nation receives special emphasis. The most serious problem, however, lay in the persistence – indeed, the intensification – of political violence. Rady's account of the rise of Nazism is enriched by an unexpected yet illuminating detour into film culture, demonstrating how cinema both reflected and shaped the era's moral landscape.

In analysing the horrors of the Second World War, Rady places particular emphasis on the notion of 'frustration' (461). The roots of hatred and genocide, he suggests, were embedded – though not deterministically – in the region's ethnic, economic, and social structures. Another key concept, 'imitation' (468–469), captures the way ordinary societies, captivated by the logic of numbers and industrial production, replicated such attitudes even in the practice of mass killing.

For Rady, Mátyás Rákosi epitomises the model of communism imported from the Soviet Union. The chapter devoted to the 1950s traces the decade's history through the biography of Hungary's party leader: a man of bourgeois Jewish background, educated in Western Europe, traumatised by the Great War, converted to Bolshevism. A follower of Stalin, a rebel, a prisoner, and ultimately an obedient servant of Moscow. From there, Rady surveys the Soviet-backed seizures of power across the region, the absurdities of central planning, and the various forms of terror, including intra-party purges. He notes, however, that the consolidation of communist rule was far from uniform – citing Poland and Romania as cases of resistance. Contrary to elements of Hungarian historiography, he attributes the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 primarily to internal party schisms. The uprising, he argues, shook the entire bloc, prompting Moscow's military and political intervention in November.

Under Soviet auspices, János Kádár's subsequent regime represents, in Rady's portrayal, a different path. The system, 'born in blood,' gradually evolved into one of relative prosperity, sustained in part by permissive economic policies – and, he provocatively suggests, by the soothing effects of pornography (484). Central European communism appears as a chain of crises, in which both repression and relaxation led inexorably to rupture, as seen in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Rady also points to the contrasting example of West Germany's economic success, which offered a palpable alternative to its communist neighbours.

In explaining the eventual collapse of these systems, Rady emphasises moral decay, the normalisation of opportunism, and economic irrationality. The transitions of 1989–1991 unfolded with varying degrees of violence, yet the slogans and imagery of freedom that accompanied them, he concludes,

were 'highly counterproductive' in their outcomes (500).

Unlike in Britain, where historians more readily engage with the contemporary past, Hungarian historiography seldom ventures into the analysis of the immediate present. Rady breaks with this convention, extending his reflection to current developments – the region's governments, strategies, foreign policies, and its relationship with the European community. His concluding remarks, pragmatic and succinct, function as both synthesis and subtle provocation.

In sum, Martyn Rady has produced a work that stands apart within Hungarian historiography. A scholar of Central European origin, he exemplifies a distinctive strength of British historical writing: the capacity to synthesise vast temporal and spatial horizons. *A New History of Central Europe* is not based on new archival discoveries but on a masterful synthesis of existing scholarship, much of it available in English. From an external perspective, the region appears as the periphery of Western Europe, still haunted by the question of its 'backwardness' – a theme long debated by historians. The book thus represents a major contribution: for scholars, it offers a revealing insight into how British academia perceives Central Europe; for general readers, it provides a monumental and intellectually rewarding journey through two thousand years of a complex and compelling past.

BALÁZS KOVÁCS

# Supreme Power and a State of Siege

Kotkin, Stephen: *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*. Budapest, Századvég, 2025.

This spring, the first volume of Stephen Kotkin's planned three-volume biography of Stalin became available to Hungarian readers. Its publication is an important milestone in Hungarian-language historical writing, as no biography of Stalin with this level of detail has previously been accessible to the Hungarian public. The original appeared in 2014, followed by the second volume in 2017, the Hungarian edition of which we are still awaiting.<sup>1</sup> The third volume envisaged by the author has not yet been published in English either. Indeed, the task he has set himself – presenting the Second World War and the post-war Soviet state all the way up to the 1989 – promises to be an even greater undertaking than the previous volumes. The author is a fellow of Stanford University and the Hoover Institution, and for more than three decades was a lecturer at Princeton. Even before the collapse of the Soviet empire, from 1986 onwards, he conducted research at the Soviet Academy, and after 1991 he continued his work in Russia at the Russian Academy of Sciences. This is evident in his book, as he draws on a substantial body of primary sources. There are no longer many new or secret materials relating to Stalin's life, but it was still necessary to sift through the large existing source base (military and police files, Communist Party documents, memoirs, etc.) as well as the secondary literature.

The two English volumes already published form a tightly connected whole, as the author treats the entire era as a single historical process, beginning with Bismarck's unification of Germany and ending with Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. Characteristically, he analyses Russia's position within the international arena, in which the German Empire of the day is, of course, an unavoidable point of reference. The first volume runs up to the (re)commencement of agricultural collectivization in 1928, the aim of which was to break the independent, economically viable peasantry. By that time Stalin had amassed enough power to attempt forced collectivization again, since up to that point only one per cent of

the peasantry had joined the collective farms (or *kolkhozes*) voluntarily – and they were typically those who had not previously succeeded in agriculture on their own.

The points mentioned above need to be clarified at once, for the volume under discussion is not a simple biography; it undertakes far more than that. The first instalment of this planned three-volume historical monograph announces, by its sheer size alone, that the reader is not holding a light or casual book. The nearly 800-page main text is supplemented by almost 400 pages of notes and bibliography. Kotkin's aim could be nothing less than a definitive, final treatment of Stalin's life and age. It is essential to present the era itself, since Stalin hardly counts as a central figure for nearly half of the first volume. This is natural: in tsarist Russia and during the First World War he played no significant role (while exiled in Siberia during the war, he had to contend mostly with boredom and mosquitoes). Even so, it does not feel excessive to devote several hundred pages to the period, or to the political and social conditions of Russia (and partly the wider world) at the time, for it is precisely from these conditions that the remorseless fury of the 1917 seizure of power – and Stalin's subsequent rise and eventual autocracy – emerged. It must also be stressed that Kotkin, in contrast to earlier psychologically focused biographies, employs a political-historical approach. His central thesis is that the true source of Stalin's power lay not in his charismatic or sociopathic personality, but in party politics and Marxist-Leninist ideology. In other words, it was not so much his childhood or upbringing that determined his later course, but the ideology he absorbed and the party-state that grew out of it – something entirely new and distinctively Bolshevik.

Stalin's early religiosity is stressed at several points, and naturally his years in the seminary also receive close analysis. The book contains a wealth of fascinating detail about this period, emphasizing that it was thanks to his diligence that he was able

<sup>1</sup> Kotkin, Stephen: *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*. New York, Penguin Random House, 2017.

to attend the ecclesiastical school in Gori and later the theological seminary in Tiflis (now Tbilisi). Yet the instructors and mentors there represented not so much the Church as tsarism itself; they were instruments of imperial policy as much as spiritual guides. We learn that, owing to his deep piety, he attended every service during his first years of study and also sang in the church choir. Later in the volume, and for the early years too, we are given detailed descriptions of each period and place: we become acquainted with Gori, Tiflis, Baku, Siberia, and many other locations tied to the trajectory of Stalin's life.

These digressions are not incidental, nor are they mere filler. In order to assess Stalin's role in the sudden and astonishing turn of events in 1917, and to understand the system he went on to build, the author embeds the protagonist in his geographical as well as his temporal context. For this reason he offers an in-depth analysis of the historical cataclysm in which Stalin himself played only a minor part. Stalin did possess a sense of mission, along with certain revolutionary attributes that proved especially advantageous under Eurasian conditions [173].<sup>2</sup> In the first half of the volume – up to roughly the completion of the Bolshevik seizure of power – Stalin remains more of a supporting character; during this period he was shaped by far more than he shaped events. The focus shifts to him only afterwards, and especially with Lenin's illness and Stalin's appointment as General Secretary. From that point on one can indeed say that his actions were significant and affected the lives of millions, though they were still not yet of world-historical consequence.

The First World War shattered the old world. It was only this collapse that opened the way for the Bolsheviks – and for Stalin – to come anywhere near power. Until then he had been languishing in north-eastern Siberia, neither a soldier nor a participant in the war, and essentially a marginal and insignificant figure. The volume therefore widens the lens so that we can see that it was not only Stalin's willpower and ambition, but also the unfolding of geopolitical and global circumstances, that made it possible for him to become what he did. According to the author, the causal arrow runs the other way as well: power – the path to it, and the actions that flowed from it – shaped Stalin into the man he became. He would possess

authority over everything, literally the power of life and death, the capacity to destroy nations and reduce them to servitude, and this, naturally, influenced his personality. This is why the book helps us understand the politics, so that we may understand and perceive the person who shaped them. Another interesting and original feature of the work is that it does not attempt to assess Stalin in moral terms; it evaluates him solely in terms of what he achieved, and in that respect – in the seizing, keeping, and wielding of power – he was a grandmaster. This, of course, in no way excuses the atrocities he committed; it simply helps us understand how and why he was able to commit them.

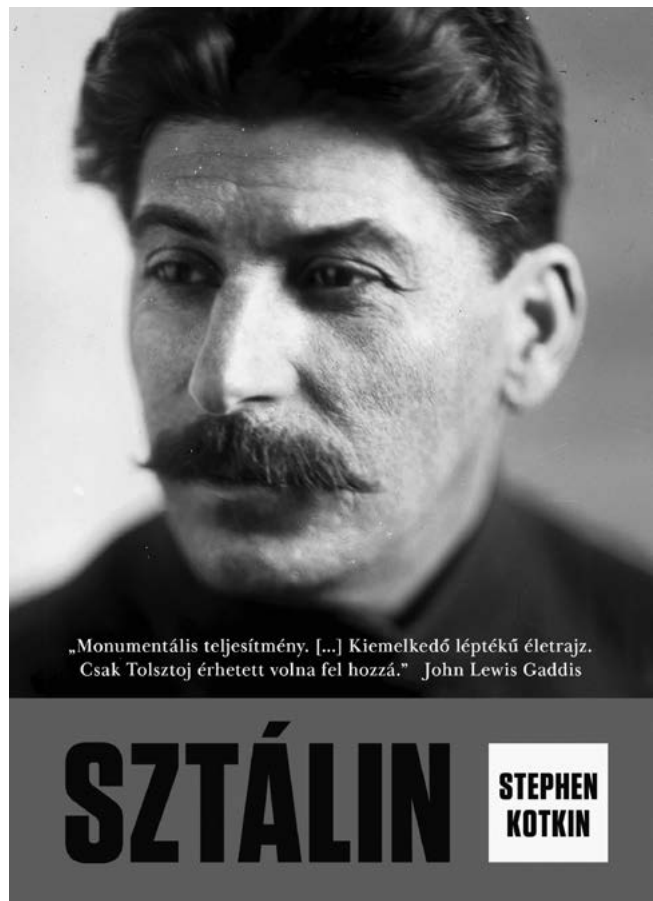
The central theme of the volume is the paradox of power indicated in its title; a paradox created in Stalin by Lenin's person and by Lenin's so-called 'testament'. Lenin was his source of legitimacy, yet the testament also undermined his authority. Stalin was exhilarated by the prospect of being at the centre of attention, of being the one who made the decisions, of being Lenin's successor – the Leader himself. But he was tormented by the fact that everyone knew Lenin's testament urged his removal. The heady joy and the anguish, the fulfilment of long-nurtured ambitions and the burden that came with power – these paradoxes of power weighed heavily upon him [641]. This tension also contributed to his numerous theatrical resignations. Yet his loyal supporters consistently refused to accept them, ultimately leaving the burden on his shoulders. We cannot know with certainty what precisely motivated these resignations. Was he expressing profound hurt? Were his darkest fears surfacing – the fear that the Central Committee might dismiss him of its own accord? Was he provocatively testing the regime's solidity? Or was this a strange way of savouring his own triumph and the exclusion of the opposition? Perhaps it was a demonstration of false modesty, casting himself as the party's humble yet indispensable servant. There may be a measure of truth in all of these. Supreme power and a state of siege, the euphoria of power and self-pity – these were the paradoxes of Stalin's rule [704].

His power rested not only on contradictions but on firm foundations as well: the apparatus and the loyal confidants who always formed a majority in the Politburo. He placed his own trusted cadres

<sup>2</sup> These page numbers refer to the Hungarian edition.

in the key positions, and only he had access to the diligently compiled cadre lists that made this possible. Of course, one cannot ignore the secret police either, whose assistance he called upon countless times. Yet all of this also required that Stalin himself, as an organizer and 'grey eminence', work relentlessly. In the early years of the Soviet Union he developed the habit of handling every important matter personally, which meant working up to fourteen hours a day and sleeping only five or six. Building a dictatorship was no simple task: it required hard work and considerable talent. Kotkin shows that Stalin's power did not stem from a charisma that appealed to the masses (as Lenin's or Trotsky's did), but from his political manoeuvring skills and his devotion to bureaucratic detail. He was the driving engine behind the construction of the party apparatus. Trotsky was mistaken: it was not the party apparatus that created Stalin's power, but Stalin who created the party apparatus, and this was a colossal step [469]. Every production indicator collapsed in the critical year of 1921; only the state apparatus ballooned. Another of Kotkin's insights is that Stalin's strength lay in conversation, in active information-gathering, and in maintaining daily, direct contact with members of the party elite. This networked mode of operating enabled him always to stay one step ahead of his rivals (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, etc.). He drew to his side anyone who would report to him and would observe the others. In this way he wove a web in which no one could know who was watching whom, since he even set people on each other. Unlike his rivals, he seized every opportunity that arose, exploiting the moment and bending it to his advantage. A key instrument in this was his use of ideology as a weapon: according to Kotkin, Stalin did not use ideology cynically. He was the one who adhered to the Marxist-Leninist canon with the greatest consistency and fanaticism. This gave him the moral and political basis to brand his opponents as 'opportunists'.

The structure and organization of the volume also deserve emphasis, for they help the reader to navigate it, and even those who do not undertake to read the entire book can readily find the sections that interest them. The work reaches beyond biography in another sense as well: the first half is not so much about Stalin himself as about the world that produced him – the collapse of the tsarist empire, revolutionary anarchy, the catastrophe of the First World War, and the



structural paranoia of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Kotkin shows that Stalin's actions can only be understood within the tragic historical context of imperial Russia. Imperial thinking, repression, and the continual postponement of modernization almost inevitably led to cataclysm. He also highlights how Stalin's nationality and regional background – with all its peculiarities and tensions – was decisive from his seminary years through to his revolutionary activity. This is followed by an examination of Lenin's legacy and the struggle surrounding it, the issue of the 'testament', and the ways in which Stalin managed to turn Lenin's heritage and loyalty to the party to his own advantage. According to Kotkin, Stalin was Lenin's most faithful disciple, at least in terms of the pragmatic exercise of power. He notes that the claim made by some commentators – that Stalin 'usurped' power – is absurd. Stalin's rise, in many respects, can be traced to Lenin's own decisions within the Bolshevik regime [464].

Among the book's many strengths, one stands out in particular: over the course of decades of research, the author uncovered numerous new archival sources that had not previously been published (including military intelligence files and secret police documents). This wealth of sources gives the work its unparalleled authenticity.

Although the volume is extensive (by no means a light holiday read), its narrative draws the reader in. Kotkin does not merely list facts, but paints literary-quality portraits of the period's figures (tsarist officials, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and others). It is difficult to say whether it is an advantage or a drawback that, owing to the broad context, the protagonist himself is sometimes pushed into the background – especially in the first half of the book. At times there is perhaps too much detail about secondary characters or about the wider historical environment and events.

The volume also examines several potential turning points that ought, in theory, to have led to the Bolsheviks' downfall, yet ultimately did not. In February 1921 there was an anti-Bolshevik workers' uprising in Petrograd, demanding freely elected soviets, but it was broken up. Then came the Kronstadt sailors' revolt, with its slogan 'all power to the soviets, but not to the parties'. This too was crushed through lies and slander, as well as with the assistance of the Cheka and of course the Red Army. By any realistic calculation, the Civil War should not have been won by the Reds. And finally, the Great Depression also aided Stalin in 1929, opening up Western markets to him and making Western technology accessible, since Western recovery depended in part on Soviet orders.

The volume concludes at the turning point of 1928, when Stalin had defeated his rivals and set in motion the vast programme of forced collectivization and industrialization – the step that would lead, in the second volume, to totalitarian dictatorship. The economic relaxation known as the New Economic Policy or NEP – sometimes also called the 'peasants' Brest-Litovsk' – had irritated Stalin from the outset, as he adhered rigidly to ideological purity. In rural Russia, markets operated, and not everything was determined by the party. In Stalin's eyes, this was incompatible with the true spirit of communism. By this point everyone in power was a Bolshevik communist. Although they did not accept private property, many of them believed that forced collectivization could not succeed and would end in collapse. Stalin, however, was unyielding. In Siberia he announced that the country had to be

modernized, which required more grain, and – in his view – collectivization was necessary to obtain it. Upon returning to Moscow, he launched the process, and it did indeed result in catastrophe, with famine and mass starvation widespread. Despite political destabilization and attempts to force his resignation, he pushed the programme through. According to Kotkin, he did so not out of sheer malice but because he believed in communism – and possessed the willpower to carry it out.

At the end of the volume the author raises the intriguing question of what might have happened had Stalin died early – something that was entirely possible, given his illnesses, accidents, and potential assassins. He answers this thought-provoking scenario by arguing that the twentieth-century history of the Soviet Union, and indeed of the world, would have unfolded very differently. But equally significant is what did *not* happen: there was no admission, by Stalin or other Bolshevik leaders, that they ought to have broken with the obvious dead end of Leninism. For them, this proved too difficult a task. It was not inevitable that power in Russia should be maintained along Lenin's path, but Stalin clung to the ideology – and this led to catastrophe.

In summary, Kotkin's work is a landmark in twentieth-century historiography – a study that revolutionizes our understanding of Stalin and is likely to become a standard reference for both historians and the informed general public for a long time to come. Yet the question naturally arises: to whom should we recommend the book? To anyone with a deep interest in Soviet history who is not deterred by its length (nor by its protagonist). For Hungarian readers, the volume inevitably evokes numerous parallels with our own post-Second World War history. One of the author's great merits is that he has managed to make this not-especially-appealing era and subject interesting and relatively accessible – even at such length. We can only repeat our hope that the third volume, as well as the Hungarian translation of the second, will appear in the near future.

BALÁZS HÁZI

# Labour Made Us Human: A Deep-Time Review of Global Labour Relations

Jan Lucassen: *The Story of Work. A New History of Humankind*. Yale University Press, 2022.

Can the history of humankind be told through the evolution of labour relations? The very formulation of this question is provocative, and it becomes even more compelling when one considers the immense temporal scale involved. The Dutch author's answer is an unequivocal yes: his work surveys more than 700,000 years across seven substantive chapters. Yet Lucassen's book, which can also be read as a synthesis of his scholarly career, does not rest solely on his individual research. Rather, it distils the collective findings of the Global Collabouratory on the History of Labour Relations (1500–2000),<sup>1</sup> an international research consortium whose results have been made publicly available in an extensive database. The study draws heavily on the taxonomy that defines the typology of labour forms, using it as a conceptual backbone for interpreting long-term transformations in work relations.<sup>2</sup>

Since its publication, the book – now also available in a Polish translation – has remained almost entirely absent from the Hungarian social-historical discourse; beyond the occasional mention, one finds virtually no direct citations. Lucassen's methodological approach diverges from a defining convention of social-historical inquiry, namely the practice of examining everyday life through selected micro-cases or typological studies in order to arrive at broader generalizations. Instead, he interprets the source base in an expansive manner, analyzing social relations, collective behavioural patterns, and large-scale societal phenomena from which he derives wide-ranging conclusions. The thematic unfamiliarity of this perspective from a Hungarian vantage point is already signalled by the subtitle, which gestures toward a new historical interpretation of 'humanity' without anchoring the narrative in a specific chronological period.

In his book, the author maps the landscape of work and labour relations, treating labour as a global organizing principle. He examines the domains of

the household, the market, and the polity, as well as the nature of horizontal and vertical relations – that is, with whom, for whom, and according to which regulatory frameworks we work. This approach renders comparable the various configurations of labour – market-based, redistributive, enslaved, wage-dependent, self-employed, and others – each appearing in historically and geographically shifting 'mixes'. In broad outline, he identifies the major cornerstones of human history in the following successive phases: hunter-gatherer societies and reciprocity; the advent of agriculture and surplus extraction; tributary redistribution; and the emergence of states and slavery. These were followed by the development of markets, deep monetization, wage labour, and the coexistence of free and unfree labour for the market; then the 'industrious revolution' and the Industrial Revolution, while the contemporary period is characterized by automation and robotics.

Even hunter-gatherer societies exhibited organized forms of decision-based labour allocation, embedded within light but discernible hierarchies, alongside long-term reciprocity and cooperation. In other words, labour does not 'begin' with the advent of agriculture. By highlighting this, Lucassen challenges both the idealized narratives of a primordial 'affluent society' and the opposing view that stresses a harsh struggle for mere subsistence. Labour is not a modern 'invention' – even if the contemporary imagination tends to associate the term with an exhausted, grimy industrial worker – but rather a constitutive element in the very process of becoming human.

In the second chapter, he adds nuance to the concept of the Neolithic Revolution. He argues that neither the emergence of agriculture nor the introduction of more sophisticated metal tools should be interpreted unambiguously as civilizational progress. Instead, these developments produced new forms of dependency, more pronounced specialization,

<sup>1</sup> <https://datasets.iisg.amsterdam/dataverse/labourrelations> (Downloaded: 2025. 11. 06.)

<sup>2</sup> Hoofmestee, Karin-Lucassen, Jan-Lucassen, Leo-Stapel, Rombert-Zijdeman, Richard: *The Global Collabouratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500-2000: Background, Set-up, Taxonomy and Applications*. Online: <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/detail?id=https%3A%2F%2Fiisg.amsterdam%2Fid%2Fdataset%2F1300>

and a gendered division of labour – particularly by increasing women’s working time – while partially preserving earlier cooperative patterns. They also transformed perceptions of time, as the seasonal rhythms of agricultural work began to dominate, and the reconfiguration of labour regimes laid the foundations for later urban forms of labour organization.

The book’s treatment of antiquity and the Middle Ages is likewise unconventional from a Hungarian perspective. Lucassen discusses the materials of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, and pre-Columbian American civilizations within a single comparative framework, thereby disrupting Eurocentric state-theoretical narratives. His most pointed claim is that this period does not exhibit a linear progression from ‘unfree’ to ‘free’ labour; rather, it reveals a mosaic-like configuration in which various forms of dependency and market relations coexist and interweave. The chapter places particular emphasis on the central role of coerced labour (such as *corvée*) and slavery in state formation, thus relativizing theories that ground political order primarily in consensus or legal-rational structures. The long-lasting and repeatedly transformed institution of unfree labour, he argues, originated in the subjugation of populations inhabiting territories acquired through military conquest.

Labour, in his view, cannot be equated with either wages or freedom: wage labour is a historically late and by no means exclusive form of work. In making this claim, the author challenges widely circulated narratives that interpret the rise of modern capitalism as the ‘liberation’ of labour. Indeed, the global integration of economic worlds did not necessarily lead to the liberalization of labour forms – a point underscored by the persistence of the transatlantic slave trade well into the nineteenth century. According to Lucassen, capitalism did not automatically bring rising living standards, a conclusion he illustrates compellingly through the analysis of working-time statistics. Between 1750 and 1830, working hours increased dramatically; in England, the so-called ‘workshop of the world,’ subsistence required roughly 300 eleven-hour workdays per year. The broader trend toward the reduction and regulation of working hours emerged primarily only after the First World War.

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Lucassen argues that labour cannot be identified strictly with wages or with freedom: wage labour is a historically late and far from universal form of work. In doing so, he challenges widespread narratives that interpret the rise of modern capitalism as the ‘liberation’ of labour. Indeed, the global integration of economic worlds did not necessarily lead to the liberalization of labour regimes – a fact starkly illustrated by the persistence of the nineteenth-century slave trade. Capitalism, he maintains, did not automatically produce rising prosperity, a point he demonstrates effectively through the analysis of working-time statistics. Between 1750 and 1830, working hours increased sharply; in England, the so-called ‘workshop of the world,’ subsistence required around 300 eleven-hour workdays annually. A general trend toward reduced and regulated working time emerged only after the First World War.

One of the book’s major strengths is its refusal to adopt a ‘The West and the Rest’ perspective – that is, a form of Western-centric superiority or analytical one-sidedness. Its field of inquiry is genuinely global, and it refrains from passing value judgments on the ‘level of development’ of particular historical regions or from comparing them hierarchically. Lucassen does not conclude that historical development culminates in Western civilization or that all other trajectories are inferior; instead, he argues that diversity is intrinsically valuable and that empathetic understanding is essential for any credible reconstruction of the past. This methodological stance enables vivid portrayals ranging from early urban high civilizations to the premodern world of Micronesia, and makes it possible to discuss, side by side, the self-organizing

practices of English weavers and the exploitation of enslaved labour in the New World.

Lucassen thus breaks with the linear, developmentalist model of human history perfected in Marxist modes of production theory. His point of departure is that labour forms do not replace one another in evolutionary succession, nor do they stand in a hierarchy of advancement; rather, multiple types coexist, and what merits analysis is their shifting proportion within a given historical mix. In the third chapter, covering the period 5000–500 BCE, he identifies six fundamental types of labour relations (including free wage labour, slavery, coerced labour, self-employment, and petty entrepreneurship) that had already crystallized and have remained present ever since in varying combinations.

When discussing the modern period, the author takes a clear position: neither wage labour nor the market 'as such' is a product of capitalism or the Industrial Revolution. Both, he argues, have existed since the late Neolithic. He attributes their expansion to recurrent waves of monetization, which he regards as the most significant factor driving both the spread of wage labour and the intensification of market exchange. The appearance of small-denomination coinage in antiquity enabled the organization of work brigades, time-based wage payments, and the rise of mass employment. He further contends that substantial and enduring economies could develop even without markets, as demonstrated by insular societies characterized by tributary redistribution. The West's long-lasting global predominance, he argues, stemmed less from the diffusion of market relations or a Western work ethic than from the expansion of Atlantic slave and raw-material trade and from the rise of the so-called industrious revolution, which increased labour intensity. Indeed, both marketization and documented instances of strikes and labour disputes appeared earlier in China than in Europe. Between 1500 and 1800, the central pillar of the emerging world economy was not the global spread of free labour contracts but the massive reliance on slavery and other unfree labour forms.

Lucassen likewise cautions against interpreting the Industrial Revolution primarily in terms of mechanization or increases in factory size. The phenomena typically associated with industrialization – shifts in consumption patterns, the entry of households into market exchange, and the proliferation of contractual small-scale enterprises – had occurred in the West well before

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What truly distinguished the Industrial Revolution, he argues, was the expansion of supervised wage labour at the expense of household-based, self-organized work. This shift heightened workplace risks and reconfigured the balance between coercion, incentives, and commitment in labour relations, creating enduring challenges for regulation and jurisprudence. This, rather than machinery alone, constituted the Industrial Revolution's decisive legacy.

In discussing the 'short twentieth century' and the present, Lucassen highlights a paradoxical transformation in the meaning of work and leisure. In societies that place a high value on leisure, he observes, leisure typically presupposes more work, while leisure time itself is filled with numerous social obligations. The institutionalization of state pensions, moreover, created a previously unknown life-course stage – what he terms a 'positive old age' – the final contours of which he situates in the contemporary period.

The book does not shy away from defining labour itself, offering a deliberately broad conceptualization. Labour encompasses all human activities that fall outside leisure or recreation – including child-care and military service. Labour, in this sense, is not limited to market settings, nor is it reducible to alienation or commodification; rather, it comprises all forms of activity that confer use value upon goods and services. One of the book's key insights is that labour not only provides subsistence and self-respect but also shapes social coexistence through the horizontal and vertical relations in which it becomes institutionalized.

Written in an accessible yet refined literary style, the volume offers a sweeping synthesis of the history of labour forms and labour relations, and, more narrowly, embeds within that broader narrative a fresh contribution to economic history. It stands as one of the most significant works in the now-fashionable field of global history, and is likely to remain influential for decades. For this reason, a Hungarian translation would be of considerable value, as it could fundamentally reshape what remains of domestic economic and social-historical research, which continues, in many respects, to be dominated by data-centric, positivist methodologies.

MARTIN GULYAS

# The past, present, and future of the Hungarian Defence Forces

**Interview with Ambassador István Gyarmati, the Secretary General of the Hungarian Atlantic Council, on the Path of the Hungarian Defence Forces from Pákozd to NATO.**



National defence issues have perhaps never been as important as they are today, as we are in a period of global transformation. That is why the volume published under the auspices of the Hungarian Atlantic Council by Zrínyi Publishing House is so exciting. We talked about the book with Ambassador István Gyarmati, Secretary General of the Hungarian Atlantic Council, about the role, history, and future of the Hungarian Defence Forces. The discussion will focus on the new volume *The Path of the Hungarian Defence Forces from Pákozd to NATO*, but broader contexts will also be discussed.

## **What was the starting point of the book, and what is its antecedent?**

The Defence Forces do not exist only as a military organisation – they have always been part of the national identity, the ability to defend oneself, and the security of the region. During my career to date, I have noticed that many people look at military issues in a simplified way, primarily from the point of view of equipment and weapon systems. I thought it was time to present the Hungarian Armed Forces in a way that takes into account the historical, political and international context.

‘From Pákozd’<sup>1</sup> represents the beginning, when the idea of self-defence was still formed within a Hungarian framework, while ‘to NATO’ represents our involvement in international cooperation – our new era – and I wanted to explore this path step by step, not only chronologically, but also thematically and conceptually.

The book is therefore a bridge: between the past and the present, as well as between Hungarian national and international Atlantic security. I am convinced that we can only understand today’s national defence tasks if we know the choices we made in the past, and the environments in which we operated.

## **The book was also made into a publication for young people. Does this have a larger purpose?**

Yes. This publication is not simply a ‘small version’ of the book for adults. The intention was to make the topic of national defence accessible, understandable, and attractive to the younger generation. I know that today’s world is different for young people: it is digital, visual, and the concepts of security and national defence are not necessarily obvious to them. Therefore, the publication was made in a lighter style, with illustrations and more easily graspable episodes. Its goal is to arouse interest, not just to inform.

<sup>1</sup> The Battle of Pákozd (29 September 1848) was the first major successful clash during the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence, when the newly formed national army stopped the outnumbered troops of the Croatian ban Jelačić. The anniversary of the battle is celebrated as the Day of the Hungarian Land Forces.

At the same time, such a volume cannot reach masses, but rather to reach a circle of interested people, who will in turn be able to influence a wider audience.

As a longer-term goal, I hope to see this material integrated into national defence education: within the framework of school lessons, as part of defence modules, or even as a supplement to youth defence programmes. I would like young people to look at national defence issues not only as 'outside observers', but to become part of the social dialogue. That is the goal. If we can help young people develop a sense of responsibility and an interest in the protection of their homeland, then the publication will become not only a cultural product but an awareness-raising tool.

### **How do you see the current situation of the Defence Forces?**

The situation is complex, but in my opinion, we are moving in a positive direction. In recent years, developments have been launched within the framework of the Zrínyi Defence and Armed Forces Development Programme<sup>2</sup> in the fields of technology, organization, and training. This is a significant step forward. At the same time, it is clear that this is only the beginning. A modern military is not only made up of new tools – the human factor is just as important: this includes training, morale, social support, and sense of vocation.

In addition, the security environment is also challenging: not only traditional military threats, but also hybrid warfare, cyberspace, and information operations are present. The military must be able to respond to these.

Europe is at a crossroads: either it takes its defence into its own hands or it becomes irrelevant. For Hungary, this means that the Defence Forces must not only be nationally strong, but must also be integrated into the European and Atlantic security community. Social support is a key issue. If the Defence Forces do not feel respected socially, and if young people do not see a future in a defence-forces career, then the whole system is vulnerable.

That is why it is extremely important to involve younger generations in this shared planning and development.

### **If you had to summarize it in one thought, what would the book say to the reader?**

The message of the book is simple: national defence is not only a military task, but a national cause. It is a part of our past, a necessity of our present and the basis of our future. The 'From Pákozd to NATO' route is not only a military development, but also a change of attitude that understands that security can only be maintained through cooperation, awareness, and continuous adaptation. The book has achieved its goal if the reader takes away one thing from it: that the history of the Defence Forces is not for its own sake, but for the protection of society, the nation, and the individual.

ÁRON LÁZIN

<sup>2</sup> The Zrínyi 2026 Defence and Armed Forces Development Programme is a ten-year, comprehensive strategy for the modernization of Hungary's armed forces, and was launched in 2017. The aim is to increase its funding to 2% of GDP, one of the pillars of which is a significant increase in the defence budget and the development of NATO-compatible capabilities.

Adrienn Marschal

## Recsk at 75: A Place of Remembrance



Seventy-five years ago the Recsk camp was opened, and on 23 September we marked the seventy-second anniversary of its closure.

It was seventy-five years ago, on 19 July 1950, that the most famous – indeed, infamous – element in the Hungarian camp system was established: the Recsk Forced Labour Camp. The illegalities and brutalities committed here have become known in our own day thanks to the recollections of those interned, the novel by György Faludy, the film by Lívia Gyarmathy and Géza Böszörményi, and the monograph on the camp written by Barbara Bank.<sup>1</sup> After the camp's closure on 23 September 1953, however, no processing or public account of what had happened could begin, as those released were required to sign confidentiality statements, any breach of which was punishable by up to ten years' imprisonment.

In Kádár-era Hungary, Recsk was spoken of – at most – within the narrowest family circles by those who had been released from the camp, which meant that no collective memory of Recsk could take shape. At the same time, individual survivors did – illegally – even during the Kádár period place a flower, a national ribbon, or a wreath on the pine-planted, effaced traces of the camp.

Abroad, however, the situation was entirely different: in exile one could speak and write freely. As a result, the first memoirs were published there, and in 1981 Zoltán Sztáray established the Association of Recsk, also known as the International Organization of Former Hungarian Political Prisoners of Recsk in the United States.

The possibility of free and shared remembrance in Hungary was opened up by an interview with Tibor Zimányi, published in *Mozgó Világ*<sup>2</sup> in 1986; by an event held in the spring of 1988 at the Jurta Theatre<sup>3</sup> at which Sándor M. Kiss spoke with four former Recsk inmates (Zoltán Benkő, Géza Böszörményi, Kálmán Kéri and Tibor Zimányi); and by the establishment of the Recsk Association in Hungary in September 1988. Soon afterwards, the idea of creating a central memorial site at Recsk emerged, and by the autumn of 1989 it was already a topic in Parliament.<sup>4</sup> Its realization nevertheless took another two years. In 1991, the work of sculptor Ádám Farkas – the son of Imre Nagy's former minister – was transported to the site of the camp. Weighing twelve and a half tonnes and more than seven metres in length, the composition consists of two large, broken limestone bars and a polished granite sphere. As the artist explained: 'The bars represent confinement, the shattered bars the end of that confinement, and the sphere rising between them

<sup>1</sup> Bank, Barbara: *Recsk*. Budapest, Szépművés, 2017.; Bank, Barbara – Gyarmati, György – Palasik, Mária: „Állami titok”. *Internáló- és kényszermunkatáborok Magyarországon. 1945–1953*. Budapest, ÁBTL – L'Harmattan, 2012.; Benkő, Zoltán: *Történelmi keresztutak*. Miskolc, Felsőmagyarország, 1993.; Böszörményi, Géza: *Recsk*. Budapest, Széphalom, 2005.; Faludy, György: *Pokolbéli vig napjaim*. Budapest, Magyar Világ, 2005; Gyarmathy, Lívia – Böszörményi, Géza: *Recsk, 1950–1953. Egy titkos kényszermunkatábor története*. [Documentary, 1988.]

<sup>2</sup> Javorniczky, István: 'Recsk 1950–1953. Beszélgetés Zimányi Tiborral'. *Mozgó Világ*, 1986/10, 39–44.

<sup>3</sup> Marschal, Adrienn: 'Recsk. Tabutól az érdekképviselőig'. In: *A felkészülés éve, 1988. A rendszerváltotatást megelőző tanácskozások*. Ed. Szeredi, Pál. Rendszerváltás Történetét Kutató Intézet és Archivum, 2018, 113–129.

<sup>4</sup> Zsidoi Istvánné felszólalása. In. Országgyűlési Napló, 20 October 1989. 5844.

represents life and perfection. [...] The prison, and by extension Bolshevism, is broken apart by life and by the striving for perfection.<sup>5</sup>

At the unveiling ceremony of the memorial erected by the Recsk Association on 25 October, Prime Minister József Antall delivered a speech, as did former Recsk inmates Kálmán Kéri and Tibor Zimányi.<sup>6</sup> On the back of the memorial, alongside the names of the former Recsk inmates, the following inscription can be read: 'On this site stood the infamous ÁVH forced-labour death camp between 1950 and 1953. May the names of the deceased or missing listed below, together with the partial list of survivors known to the Recsk Association, serve as testimony both for future generations and for historical remembrance.'



The reconstructed barracks of the Recsk Camp, Photo by the author



The central memorial of Recsk, Photo by the author

by iron chains. One bears the inscription: 'Erected in memory of the victims of the Recsk death camp by the Recsk National Memorial Park Foundation under the chairmanship of Dr Zoltán Benkő'. Another carries a quotation: 'for your spines did not bend, your fates were battered by storms; now, in the sacred homeland

<sup>5</sup> Kádár, Márta: 'A recski emlékkő és alkotója'. In. *Új Magyarország*, 21 January 1992. 8.

<sup>6</sup> 'Emlékműavatás Recsken'. *Heves Megyei Hírlap*, 22 October 1991. 3.; 'Emlékmű Recsken'. *Kisalföld*, 26 October 1991. 1.

<sup>7</sup> 'Nemzeti emlékpark Recsken'. *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, 30 September 1996. 2.; 'Nemzeti emlékpark Recsken'. *Népszabadság*, 30 September 1996. 4. Orbán, Éva: 'A magyarok ellen elkövetett gaztettekért nincs felelősségre vonás?' *Kapu*, 2011/9, 88–90.



Memorial in the Recsk cemetery, Photo by the author

of rest, may you dream of peace [...]'. Behind this monument lies the grave of Zoltán Módly, who died in the camp, while Dr Zoltán Benkő is also buried in the Recsk cemetery.

In 2005, in memory of those who died in the camp, a local resident, Anna Borsós (née Szabó), had a cross erected within the former camp area, 'in gratitude, to the glory of God, and in memory of our Hungarian brothers and sisters who were imprisoned here'. In front of it a marble plaque was placed: 'This cross was erected in memory of those who died in this camp and whose burial places are still unknown to this day.'<sup>8</sup>

In 2006, on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and War of Independence, a memorial plaque was placed in honour of those former Recsk prisoners who lost their lives during the reprisals that followed 1956. Beneath the three cross-shaped monuments one can read the following inscription: 'Among our fellow sufferers from Recsk, many endured prison sentences during the reprisals, and Elemér Földváry-Boér, József Dudás, and Ernő Marényi died a heroic death. We have locked their memory in our hearts; we shall preserve it forever – they are an example to us and to our descendants.'

In 2010 the Recsk National Memorial Park was expanded with a new facility: a permanent exhibition created in the camp's only surviving former ÁVH stone building. Curated by Barbara Bank, the exhibition presents the history not only of the Recsk camp but also of the other internment camps in Hungary, through panels, photographs, and contemporary documents. The exhibition was opened on 25 September 2010 at a commemorative ceremony attended by President László Sólyom.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, in January 2012, the former site of the Recsk camp was declared a historical memorial site, the maintenance of which is today overseen by the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security.

It is in this former camp – now home to several memorials and monuments – that the Recsk Association holds its annual commemoration each year at the end of September. Yet those who gather there on the anniversary of the camp's closure have gradually dwindled, as the former internees pass away. It has therefore become our task to remember them – and to ensure that others remember.

<sup>8</sup> Sz. I.: 'Minden emberre próbatétel vár'. *Heves Megyei Hírlap*, 26 September 2006. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Szencz, Dóra: 'A magyar Gulág'. *Magyar Demokrata*, 5 October 2010. 9.; Sinkovics, Ferenc: 'Recsk, az élet végállomása'. *Magyar Hírlap*, 7 October 2010. 5.

# Key international events of recent years

## HELMUT KOHL AND CENTRAL EUROPE: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN THE HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENT

The year 2022 marked the fifth anniversary of Helmut Kohl's death and the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Prime Minister József Antall. To mark the occasion, the Institute and Archives for Research into the History of the Regime Change organised an international academic conference titled Helmut Kohl and Central Europe on 24 May 2023, held in the Upper Chamber Hall of the Hungarian Parliament. The conference sought to examine the role the conservative statesman played in Hungary's transition to democracy, how the newly liberated Central European nations searched for their own paths, and the ways in which those paths became interconnected.

In his opening remarks, Gábor Nyári, Managing Director of the Institute, noted that Helmut Kohl's active political career spanned more than half a century. It encompassed Germany's post-war recovery, the creation and consolidation of the Federal Republic, and, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the reunification of Germany. Both Kohl and József Antall had clear conceptions of and visions for Europe, and the many points of connection between these visions helped to forge their friendship.

Although Antall was granted only a few years on the political stage, his family background, participation in the 1956 Revolution, and professional and leadership experience all drew him towards public life. While Kohl laboured to achieve German reunification, Antall – serving as the first freely elected Prime Minister after the regime change – sought to establish a democratic rule of law and to unite the fifteen million Hungarians living within and beyond Hungary's borders. The turn of the 1980s and 1990s was a period of searching for direction, as the weakening and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible for the states of Central Europe to follow their own course.

At the RETÖRKI scientific conference, the speakers included Hans Kaiser, Péter Krisztián Zachar, Andrej Tóth, Natália Váradi, Tamás Péter Baranyi and Gyula Speck. The proceedings were concluded by Péter Strausz, Retörki's Scientific Director, with a lecture titled József Antall and Cooperation Between Central European Nations.

## BORDER INCIDENT – THE LIFE OF A BORDER GUARD OFFICER ON THE FRONTIER OF TWO WORLD SYSTEMS

On 6 September 2023, a work by Árpád Bella entitled *Határeset – Egy határőrtiszt életútja két világrendszer határán* (Border Incident: The Life of a Border Guard Officer on the Frontier of Two World Systems) was presented at the Teachers' Cultural Centre in Sopron. In his recollections, the former border guard commander provides insight into the Pan-European Picnic and other key events of 1989. Edited by István Bandi, the volume is an extensive life interview with the now-retired senior officer, offering readers a close view of the border opening that marked the beginning of the transition to democracy. As István Bandi writes, 'history was not sparing' with Árpád Bella: he was born just after the Second World War, lived through the 1956 Revolution, and witnessed the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. The book launch opened with introductory remarks by Dr Gábor Nyári, managing director of the RETÖRKI Institute and Archives, and Dr Ciprián Farkas, the mayor of Sopron.

## MAKING VISEGRAD HISTORIES DIGITAL – PROJECT MEETING IN BUDAPEST

Between 17 and 19 November 2023, the team of the international Erasmus+ project Making Visegrad Histories Digital visited Budapest. The project brings together historians, history-didactics specialists, and history teachers to develop digital teaching materials on Polish, Czechoslovak, and Hungarian history from 1945 to 1989. RETÖRKI was also represented at the event. Richárd Fodor, a member of RETÖRKI's History

Didactics and Pedagogy Workshop, presented didactic tasks based on excerpts from the volume *Word for Word – Minutes of the HSWP Political Committee, 1985–89*, published in our source-edition series.

### **INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL TEACHING-MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROJECT MEETING IN WROCLAW ON PRESENTING THE BACKGROUND OF THE COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP**

The implementation of the Making Visegrad Histories Digital Erasmus+ project continued in Wrocław, Poland, at the end of July, with the participation of colleagues from our institute. This collaborative project involving history teachers, historians, and experts in history didactics from across the Visegrad region aims to support a deeper understanding of the shared historical past between 1945 and 1989 through source-based activities and digital learning methodologies.

On 27 May 2024, staff members of the RETÖRKI Institute and Archives and the Committee of National Remembrance contributed as speakers to a terminological seminar organized at the initiative of the Hungarian Historical Society. Historians attending the seminar explored three thematic areas: the political system, economic and social change, and the questions surrounding the regime change. Our institute was represented by Balázs Kovács, Zoltán Nagymihály, and Dr habil. Péter Strausz as speakers.

During the meeting, the participating historians and didactics experts reviewed the digital development of more than fifteen ongoing subtopics. The wide-ranging themes included propaganda and the media, religious persecution, the history of socialist industrial towns, as well as panel housing and rock music. The source-based teaching materials are being produced for *Historiana*, the open-access platform of EuroClio, and will be complemented by teachers' guides. The completed developments will be followed by local teacher-training sessions and professional events in all four Visegrad countries, about which we will continue to report.

### **MLE ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN ZENTA**

The 2024 annual conference of the Hungarian Archivists' Association (MLE) was held in Zenta from 1 to 3 July. On the second day, at the Preservation Section session, Adrien P. Holl, preservation specialist at RETÖRKI, gave a presentation on preservation projects in Vojvodina, Serbia. In her talk as section chair, she also reviewed the professional links developed over the past decades with the Zenta Historical Archives and the Archives of Vojvodina. Our colleague expressed her satisfaction with the ongoing cooperation, highlighting last year's MLE Preservation Section training and the work of the preservation panel at the international ICARUS conference held in June. She emphasized the importance of knowledge-sharing, disseminating best practices, and supporting smaller archives. The session also featured four further presentations and a video on the production of an authenticated copy of Maria Theresa's 1774 Privilege Charter of Nagyikinda.

### **RETÖRKI LECTURE IN INDONESIA**

Dr habil. Péter Strausz, RETÖRKI's director of research, delivered a lecture on 14 October 2024 at Pattimura University in Ambon, Indonesia, on the historical relationship between Germany and East-Central Europe.

### **RETÖRKI LECTURE IN KAZAKHSTAN**

During his visit to Kazakhstan, Dr habil. Péter Strausz, RETÖRKI's director of research, visited the Department of History at al-Farabi National University in Almaty. On 10 March 2025, he met with Professor Bereket Karybaev, head of department, and on 12 March he presented the work of RETÖRKI to the department's lecturers, researchers, and doctoral students. The meeting also provided an opportunity for professional discussion and for exploring possibilities for future academic cooperation.

## RETÖRKI PARTICIPATION AT THE 34TH ICARUS ARCHIVAL CONFERENCE

On 12 May 2025, our colleagues Vivien Rapali, senior archival officer, and Barnabás Pálincás, Deputy Director for Archival and Professional Development, represented our institute at the conference of ICARUS (International Centre for Archival Research), held in Budapest. In her presentation *The Hungarian Technical Intellectuals: Challenges in Researching Their Migration and Legacy – A Case Study of the Viktor Babits Papers*, Vivien Rapali discussed the research difficulties surrounding the migration of Hungarian technical intellectuals and traced the fate of the Viktor Babits collection. In his talk *The Return of József Szilágyi's Documents: Sources of Hungarian Emigration in the RETÖRKI Collection*, Barnabás Pálincás presented the story of the repatriation of József Szilágyi's papers and offered an overview of the Hungarian sources on emigration held at RETÖRKI. Their participation marks an important milestone for the institute, signalling RETÖRKI's active integration into the international archival research community.

## SOUTH KOREAN DELEGATION VISITS RETÖRKI

The South Korean Ministry of Unification regularly organizes study visits for senior governmental, state, and administrative officials, enabling them to gain first-hand insight into how other countries transitioned from communist dictatorship to democracy. On 22 September 2025, members of one such delegation visited RETÖRKI, where Dr Gábor Nyári, executive director, and Dr habil. Péter Strausz, director of research, delivered lectures on twentieth-century Hungarian history and the processes of the 1989–1990 democratic transition.

## LECTURE BY TAMÁS FRICZ ON GLOBAL ELITES

On 30 September 2025, colleagues were able to attend a lecture by political scientist Tamás Fricz entitled *Global World, the European Union and Hungary: In the Process of Global Change*. The presentation took the audience on a journey both around the globe and across time. It addressed international financial and power networks and their considerable informal political influence worldwide. Fricz outlined the structure and operational mechanisms of the global elite, particularly through various financial foundations. He also discussed themes from his book *A „felülírt” demokrácia* (The 'Overwritten' Democracy), touching on the relationship between Central European nation-states and the international economic-political elite.

## EPHEMERA FROM THE HISTORY OF HUNGARIANS IN SLOVAKIA

On 28 October 2025, the Research Institute and Archives for the History of the Regime Change transferred a collection of ephemera relating to the Hungarian-speaking regions of Slovakia to the institution responsible for holding such materials: the Slovakian Hungarian Archives of the Fórum Minority Research Institute in Somorja. The documents came to light during the arrangement of the papers of Károly Vigh. Among the material, archivists discovered a set of original printed ephemera that had in all probability once belonged to the collection of the Nationality Documentation Centre of Somorja, founded in 1991 by the historian-archivist Sándor Varga and formerly operating as a civil association. Today, the archival and documentation work of that centre is carried out by the Slovakian Hungarian Archives of the Fórum Institute, meaning the transferred items have, in effect, been returned to their original custodial home. During the visit, archive director Szilvia Sipos Forgón and archivist Zoltán Kőrös gave a brief introduction to the Fórum Institute's collections, after which they discussed future opportunities for cooperation between the two archives with Barnabás Pálincás, deputy director for archival and professional development.

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Hungarian diplomat, state secretary, security policy expert, and university lecturer. Between 1981 and 1996, he held various positions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was chairman of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, a member of the Board of the International Institute of Strategic Studies. As Head of the Hungarian Delegation to the OSCE, Chair of the Task Force of The Hungarian OSCE Presidency, Director General for Security Policy, etc. He also served as Head of OSCE Missions to Georgia and Chechnya, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Senior Vice President of the EastWest Institute, and Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Monitoring Mission in Moldova. Member of the Hungarian delegation at the Vienna disarmament talks between 1990 and 1992. Head of the Security Policy and European Cooperation Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1992 to 1996. Deputy State Secretary for Defense Policy at the Ministry of Defense (1996-1999), Chief Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1999.

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Historian and diplomat. He studied at Comenius University in Bratislava and József Attila University in Szeged. He graduated from Eötvös Loránd University with a degree in history and sociology in 1986. From 1988 he worked in the field of nation policy and culture. From 1988 he served as a diplomat at the Embassy of Hungary in Warsaw on several occasions. Between 2015 and 2019 he was the director of the Hungarian Institute in Bratislava. His area of research focuses on the life of János Esterházy.

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