

„Kik a Krisztusban hunytak el, mind boldogok”

Hitvalló egyház magyar mártírjai

Szerkesztette:

Petheő Attila – Tömösközi Ferenc



„Kik a Krisztusban hunytak el, mind boldogok” „Blessed are those who have died in the Lord”

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Hungarian martyrs of the Church of the Faith

Edited by

Attila Petheő – Ferenc Tömösközi



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Selye János Egyetem
Református Teológiai Kar

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Selye János Egyetem Református Teológiai Kar

Lecturers
Mgr. Pólya Katalin, PhD.
Pető Bálint, PhD.

English language lektor
Móricz Árpád
Mgr. Lengyel-Marosi Renáta, PhD.

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Foreword¹

Alfréd Somogyi²

I stand here with a grateful heart and joy because we can focus on a part of our past, which has been over-silenced and taboo for a long time, all thanks to the organisers of the conference and the exhibition. Now we can examine the unmasked workings of an anti-God and anti-church system without direct political consequences. In this system, the class struggle was more valued than faith, party discipline, more than spiritual peace, the Soviet Union, more than the commandment of love, and the party itself, more than the Lord Jesus. There could be only one true colour: red, and only one idea: the crazy fever of achieving communism. Those who got in the line counted, and those who did not, had to be eliminated or at least made impossible.

We are in an academic circle in a university environment, so we can talk about things that we would be ashamed of elsewhere. In my youth, I often heard the argument that there is not much difference between the Church's teaching and the communist idea, for both preach equality. However, in one, people call each other brothers and sisters, whereas, in the other, people call each other comrades. To someone who had looked at things from afar, this deceptive comparison might even have seemed true, but, thanks to our parents, those of us who experienced the system of appearances – which was based on lies and dishonesty – would never have thought of this analogy. I am convinced that this comparison was invented and spread by communist propaganda in order to compare the inhumanity and dishonesty of the self to an idea that had credibility, authority, and value; also, in order to elevate himself and pull down the other, who had authority, to his level.

1 The Foreword was said at the opening of conference and exhibition called Hungarian martyrs of the Church of the Faith.

2 Doc. ThDr. Alfréd Somogyi, PhD. is the Dean of the Faculty of Reformed Theology of J. Selye University. The following text was written based on Somogyi's speech held at the Conference in *Hítvalló egyház magyar mártírjai* (Komárno, 4. 10. 2022).

These colour-changing communists, who have gone from red to blue and green in thirty years, are still trying to make themselves more acceptable on the back of the Church and its authority. Today, this tends to happen in such a way that what money a conservative leadership saves, the 'contemporary offspring' of the Bolsheviks can professionally spend so that it has no national or communal benefits.

The discerning and careful eye does not judge by colour but takes a stand on professed values. That is why I consider this exhibition and this conference to be of the utmost importance, for every image, every sentence, and every message in the exhibition – and I trust that every word of the presentations – will shed light on the Bolshevik roots, starting from the Bastille Siege, whence the same satanic will has emerged in who knows how many different forms! Because let us admit it, this idea has a problem with two issues: God and man – especially the God-fearing man. Do we have any idea why? Because a man of faith is conscious: he knows where he comes from and where he is going. Even if we often put it in most profane terms, as we are dust to dust, it is still consciousness, awareness, and responsibility before God. That is what the Bolshevik ideal, with all its incarnation, fear of. The greatest danger for him is a conscious and thinking man who sees through the wrapped lies. The man who can quickly assess the illiteracy of the full-powered party secretary, the mendacity of the system, who can see the unsmiling faces of individuals in the clapping and waving crowd, who can see behind the nimbus of the grand leader with the moments of horror in the 'denailing' basements, and, finally, who sees the unviability of the Bolshevik ideology and speaks about it. No dictatorship can tolerate such a man.

I am stepping out of the era a bit, but I will not go further than the twentieth century. Áron Márton and József Mindszenty exposed the nakedness of the communist king. Dietrich Bonhoeffer revealed the nakedness of the National Socialist, Nazi king. Furthermore, Birta József unmasked the naked king of the first Czechoslovak Republic, who was called democratic. How did the unmasked react? By pronouncing the death penalty. The man who sees and perceives, the man of stamina, the man who fears God, must be eliminated! Because he is smarter than the reigning powers and because he sees through them and warns us that trouble is coming.

I want to talk briefly about two letters: “c” and “f”. Before anybody gets the wrong idea, I will clarify it: it is a Latin abbreviation for “coactus feci”, which is usually added to a signature by people who want to indicate that they have acted under duress. You will be familiar with the story of József Mindszenty, who signed his confession like this in 1948 after the interrogations under torture. When the tribunes asked him what a “c.f.” was, he said it was his church office.

There is a pertinent verse in the Book of Proverbs: ““Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a godless fool who gets plenty to eat, a contemptible woman who gets married, and a servant who displaces her mistress.” So much for that!

Speaking of the Scriptures, in the Gospel of Matthew, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, among the Beatitudes, the Lord Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5,10). I believe that this is literally true of the martyrs of our Christian (catholic word) and Christian (protestant) churches!

I have one more point to make, but only because the academic community demands it. We are talking about a confessing church, but that is not an accurate description. Theologically, it is not because a confessing church is a church that has or gives a confession of faith. Our historical churches, since the Apostles’ Creed or the Second Helvetic Creed, are still confessing churches whatever they do. From a historical point of view, the phrase “confessing church” is not perfect because it was the officials of our churches at the time who most often colluded with the current secular powers and made the Church into a church of submission, peace-fighter, or even serving Church. We are not proud of it, but unfortunately, it is a historical fact. They behaved as should have been expected of all church people: leaders and followers. That is why this exhibition is important: we, the church people, meet here to improve the historical image of the Church.

In this exhibition, we will discover the lives of twenty churchmen – priests, pastors, monks – who stood up for their ideals, truths, values, and beliefs they professed and undertook. Some of them were shot by the Russians; some simply disappeared; some were beaten to death; some were tried and executed by conception trial; some were simply run over by a truck to make it look like an accident; some were interned, and it is not known how they died.

Furthermore, some were trapped and left to die without medical treatment; others were made ill deliberately so that they would pass out of this shadow world.

Two worlds emerge from the material of the exhibition. The first is the vile regime of the Bolshevik dictatorship, which wants to make it disappear with a wry smile, which either still gives at least some semblance of a smile or no longer cares but only wants those who disturb its circles to get out of its way. In contrast, the second world is the Christian (Catholic/ Protestant) Church with its two thousand years of history and burden. It stands there through one of its men who is fragile and destructible, like Christ before Pilate, like Irenaeus before the soldiers of the emperor Septimus Severus, like Origen before the Roman soldiers who beat him to death, or like Martin Luther before the imperial assembly at Worms.

Now they stand before us, and they cannot do otherwise. They are here before us to cure us of our defeatist self, our willingness to compromise, our willingness to save our skins. They are here before us to set an example because we, as ecclesiastics and academics, must be examples to those entrusted to us. I thank the Liszt Institute in Bratislava and the Department of Historical Sciences, namely my colleagues Attila Petheő and Ferenc Tömösközi, for their organisation. And again, I quote the Sermon on the Mount, when I say, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16).

For all those, we see here and with whom we can get to know from our past, for their perseverance, may God alone be glorified!

The Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia under the Burden of Socialist Law

Loránt Rákos³

After the end of the Second World War, the tactical positioning of Czechoslovakia, which quickly sided with the victors – after three years of conscious preparation, including a serious Czech and Slovak resistance, which was explicitly supported by the Soviet Union, and also the influx of preferring the communist ideas from the West – almost made the so-called “*ice-breaking February*”, when the communists took power on 25 February 1948, as a moment of celebration. It was indeed – in the unpleasant sense of the word – a radical breakthrough in state administration, not only because the communist elite regarded it as an almost national-democratic revolution but also because the state power, under the pressure of left-wing ideas, saturated almost every segment of the state administration with unbridled enthusiasm. This laid the foundations of a new so-called ‘minority-free’ nation-state, which in turn meant a foreign policy based on a new ideology – which of course meant nothing less than cooperation with the Soviet Union – and a new ideology of internal and minority policy, a new economic policy – which meant nothing less than ruthless nationalisation, the sole aim of which was to secure national common property – and, last but not least, a church policy under the Communist-Marxist-Leninist ideology.⁴

Of course, to speak of church politics in a communist era is only as grotesque as the communists themselves thought of it in terms of some nationalised concept of the Church (of course, not confusing this concept with the concept of “state church”). Especially because this concept was mostly filled with a fanatic-Marxist determination – disguised as a church-keeping pretence,

3 JUDr. ThDr. Loránt Rákos, PhD. is the Vice Bishop of the Slovak Reformed Christian Church.

4 Czajlik, Katalin: *70 éve volt a Csehszlovákiában a kommunista hatalomátvétel*, in: <https://ujso.com/kozelet/70-eve-volt-csehszlovakiaban-a-kommunista-hatalomatvetel>.

but still – whose only objective was to make the functioning of the Churches more difficult and ultimately impossible. “*Communism has surpassed in size and violence all the persecutions ever directed against the Church,*” – writes Pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*. The communists, in fact, saw the churches as rabble-rousing communities that diverted people’s attention from these earthly injustices to the justice available in the heavenly spheres, thus leading people to complete passivity, i.e., not to take a stand against the injustices resulting from the unequal distribution of wealth, but rather to tolerate everything because God will do justice anyway, thus forming, as a kind of idle community, the antithesis of the communist community of producers and builders, of the proletarian who hunger and want to do something for his own justice. Such factors – incomprehensible in the materialist world, spiritually ineffectual and altogether useless – have no place in the image of the active state because “the social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, humiliation, servility, humility, that is to say, one and all, the qualities of the mob...” (Karl Marx).⁵

Thus, after the communist takeover in 1948, the churches became the victims of the attacks of party politics, which exploited all the vilest aspects of Marxist atheism. In Czechoslovakia, this took on a double dimension. On the one hand, it was intended to get rid of the churches from the face of the state, and on the other hand to eliminate minorities that were detrimental to the overall image of the nation-state – since patriotism based on nationalism was also unthinkable in the sense that there was no such thing as a Czech, Slovak, Hungarian or Gypsy, but only a good communist. Thus, this new regime, based on a rather polar philosophy, hit equally and imaginatively the majority and the minority churches; nevertheless, the minority churches felt more hatred from state power in their daily lives.⁶

5 Horváth, Artilla: *A vallásszabadság korlátozása és az egyházak üldözése Magyarországon a szovjet típusú diktatúra idején*, in: <https://polgariszemle.hu/archivum/86-2014-marcius-10-evfolyam-1-2-szam/veluenk-elo-mult/586-a-vallasszabadsag-korlatozasa-es-az-egyhzak-ueldoezese-magyarorszagon-a-szovjet-tipusu-diktatura-idejen#note3>

6 Menyhárt, József: *Egyház és nyelv (A katolikus egyház nyelvpolitikája Szlovákiában)*, in: <https://forumszemle.eu/2003/06/08/menyhart-jozsef-egyhz-es-nyelv-a-katolikus-egyhz-nyelvpolitikaja-szlovakiban/>

When imagining the pressure of socialist law on the churches – and within them, the minority Reformed Church – one should always think about the “hatred” of the state power as a unit of measurement. After the takeover of power in 1948, the communists began implementing their comprehensive social and economic programmes. The explicit instrument of this was the military power of plan command – on the Soviet model – with nationalisation at its centre. Just as this went through by violent forcing into cooperatives – in agriculture – they intended to do the same with the Church, mainly by putting church property at the service of the state economic plan. In fact, the forced process of nationalisation was already noticeable in Czechoslovakia from 1945 onwards – and only intensified from 1948 onwards – but outside the Church, this process did not meet with much social resistance; here and there people encountered a few outbreaks of civil disobedience at the individual or small community level, but these were always easily dismantled by the state authorities.⁷ Finally, there remained the so-called hard nut, the Church. By this time, the state had already made the elite of the national minorities (including the Hungarians) almost completely disappear. Furthermore, the middle class had been eroded, leaving only a working-class peasant class, over which the Church still had a great deal of influence, and which – as they claimed – could only be controlled if the state brought it under its full financial influence.

At that time, following the organisation of the state after Trianon, the so-called Congruah Law (Law No 124 of 1926), which had been enacted, was already in force, and its subject was “the congruity of the pastors of congregational churches, religious associations admitted by the state, who are active in the administration of pastoral offices and other pastoral-administrative functions regularly approved by the state, which is fixed at the amount of CZK 9,000 per year.”⁸ This law remained in force after the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Republic and the creation of the Slovak Republic and the Czech-Moravian Protectorate. In the Slovak Republic, during the war, the Tiso regime committed itself to pay the congruah under Act No 30 of 1941, but under renewed conditions: the payment of the congruah was made conditional on

7 Czajlik, Katalin: *70 éve volt a Csehszlovákiában a kommunista hatalomátvétel*, in: <https://uj szo.com/kozelet/70-eve-volt-csehszlovakiaban-a-kommunista-hatalomatvetel>

8 Visky, István: *A magyar református egyház elszakított részei a két világháború között*, in: http://epa.oszk.hu/01500/01515/00005/pdf/mediarium-iii_048-061.pdf

the acquisition of Slovak citizenship or the taking of the oath of citizenship. Following the restoration of Czechoslovak statehood in 1945, the continuity of the payment of the ecclesiastical congruah was ensured by Presidential Decree No 116 of 1945, amending the Law of 25 June 1926, which provided for the payment of the clergy of churches and religious communities and the supplement to their lowest annual income.

The communist authorities made a significant change in 1948, when they decided to modify the economic practice towards churches again and adopted Law No. 218 of 1949 on the economic security of churches and religious communities guaranteed by the state (No. 219-223/1949). This law is therefore based on a new philosophical understanding of social conditions, which no longer recognises the autonomy of the clergy even in the spiritual sphere of society but places them under the direct and full influence of the state through their financial remuneration – all this organised by the state. In this way, the institution of the Congruah was abolished as a superfluous institution on 1 November 1949.⁹ It should be noted that the term ‘ensuring economic security’ may be somewhat misleading in terms of the law since the financing of the churches under this law entailed the prior and total expropriation of church property, on the ideological theory that the state was ensuring the maintenance of the churches by the equitable distribution and then the restitution of church goods. It is worth mentioning that the churches did not need this at all. If they had retained all their assets, the denominations would have been able to sustain themselves very well with no hardship. However, by taking away church property and investing back very little of it, the state actually forced the churches to find more of their own resources to cover the material needs of their ministry, since only about a third of the clergy received a so-called state congruence (in addition to a small salary) for some task performed for the state, such as keeping records or teaching religious education, if allowed.

Law 218 of 1949 thus carried out a complete cleansing. It cut off all other public and private support for churches and church institutions (except for donations to coin-box) because, in return, “all obligations were assumed and

9 doc. JUDr. Mgr. Švecová, Adriana, PhD. – doc. JUDr. Laclavíková, Miriam, PhD.: *Tradícia a perspektívy odmeňovania duchovných v podmienkach Československej republiky v rokoch 1918 – 1950*, in: <https://www.truni.sk/sites/default/files/uk/f000223.pdf>

fulfilled by the state”, wrote the lawyer Josef Plojhar in a journal in 1950. The state has incorporated church property into its budget, a sum of several million euros which is now part of the national economic result, and which only grows from the productive activity of the working class, not from the Church’s work. Yet so that the state benefits the Church, it asks only one thing – which also asks from its other citizens – namely, loyalty and obedience to the state and its laws and the popular democratic system. This obedience must be demanded of every church person: from the simple church member to the bishop. Since the state has assumed the duties of a de facto upholder vis-à-vis the Church, it also has rights towards it. It has thus claimed the right of supreme supervision and the right to approve in advance the appointment of persons to fill vacant pastoral posts. In other words, the ideology was that if the state was providing the money, it was natural that only politically reliable people should be appointed to vacant church posts. “Today, we are controlled by the working class, and the clergy must find the right relationship with that class,” this expectation was addressed to them.

The State Office for Church Affairs was also established to maintain this dictated relationship between the State and the Church by Law 217 of 1949. Of course, there is little need to demonstrate that the state fulfilled almost none of its obligations under the law. Act 218 of 1949, with its almost one-page Section 14, offered an idealistic view of its caring attitude to the outside world – in which everything was provided, from the payment of the pastor’s salary, from travel expenses to removal costs to the payment of other expenses associated with the ministry. However, it refused to finance anything other than the meagre salary of the pastor. In response to this, there was resistance from the churches in various forms, such as the creation of counter-committees in Moravia and Silesia, which were then easily liquidated by the State Ecclesiastical Office, with the total confiscation of their assets.¹⁰

It is unknown if the state has fulfilled any of the fourteen articles in our Reformed Church besides the pastoral salary. In fact, Law 218 of 1949 regulated the economic financing of the churches in Czechoslovakia/Slovakia for 70 years. In addition to the basic salary of pastors, it provided for the payment of seniority and performance bonuses, the sum of which was the

10 JUDr. Csukás, Adam *Cirkevná konkurencia v Československu*, in: <https://www.truni.sk/sites/default/files/uk/f000223.pdf>

gross salary of a pastor. The law has been amended by a total of ten government decrees, the most recent being the so-called salary scale 420 of 2014, which established the salary of church employees in five categories (C, D, E, F, G):

- C - from EUR 6,64 to EUR 23,24 per month
- D - from EUR 16,60 to EUR 39,84 per month
- E - from EUR 26,56 to EUR 66,39 per month
- F - from EUR 43,16 to EUR 99,59 per month
- G - from EUR 66,39 per month to EUR 165,97

After seventy years, however, the atheistic law for churches, Law 218 of 1949, has served its purpose. It was time to replace a law full of ecclesiastical hatred with a new law full of ecclesiastical indifference. This was not what the churches expected, but this is what the church got, and the Law 370 of 2019 on the financial support of churches and religious communities was born. The drafting of the law was preceded by a series of consultations in the framework of a body which was set up at the initiative of the government of representatives of the historic churches. During these consultations, the preparation of the law proposed to the church representatives several models for settling the financial relationship between the state and the Church. The starting point was a partial separation of the Church and State, but at least to separate as far as possible. The first model was a calculation “per church member model”, whereby the state would provide a maximum of 250 pastors for the members between 55 000 and 11 000, with a salary of 80% of the average national wage (estimated state contribution: € 4 140 134). The next model offered was the so-called “assignment model”, whereby each taxpayer could donate 2% of his tax to the Church but would not receive any state support (estimated maximum: €1 596 478). The third model was a modified version of the first, i.e., a model based on church membership, whereby the average income and the number of church members would be taken into account when subsidising the salaries of pastors (positive discrimination). Finally, the new law provided subsidies based on the number of believers registered with each Church in the census. However, there is a critical reactionary tone to this, as Miroslav Tížik, a sociologist at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, put it: “The reference to the census clearly indicates that the money previously allocated to churches will now be distributed based on the number of members. This will be bad for

small churches, as it is much more costly to offer adequate religious services because of the small number of worshippers and their dispersed nature”.¹¹ “There is nothing new under the sun” – one could quote Ecclesiastes 1,9 considering the situation of our Reformed Church from the trauma of Trianon to the present day in Czechoslovakia or Slovakia. Since this land has gone by so many names in the short vicissitudes of time, allow me, dear audience, to call this land by the only sure name that has stood for at least a thousand years: the Highlands (Felvidék). Powers, state names, state structures and ideologies have come and gone, but our Church and we have been here. We have remained here all along, only to find that everyone has been trying to regulate us with a rushing and hurried impulse, thinking that they have the stone of wisdom. They came and went with hatred and dislike. The Lord of history always sees to it that the unviable ones who have fallen are gone. “The water runs, the stone remains”, writes Wass Albert (Message to home). Today we are once again caught up in an oppressive, splashing state desire to regulate us, but once again, we can only say with resigned faith: but the stone remains, the stone remains.

11 <https://korkep.sk/cikkek/tarsadalom/2019/07/09/valtozik-az-egyhaziak-finanszirozasa-szlovakiaiban-uj-rendszer-szerint-fogjak-kapni-a-tamogatásokat/>

Servant of God János Esterházy

His Martyrdom and its Interpretation Today

Imre Molnár¹²

It is known from the history of saints that the man who surrenders himself to the will of God becomes a Sign by receiving divine grace. The saints and the blessed are signs of the age in which they were given to live, and it is through the signs of the life lived by the saints and the blessed that can be best described and interpreted these ages. Such a sign of his age, shining ever brighter, is the Servant of God János Esterházy, whose beatification ceremony began in Krakow on 25 March 2019.

Biographical summary

Count János Esterházy was born on 14 March 1901 in Velké Zálužie, the son of Countess Erzsébet Tarnowska of Poland and Count János Mihály Esterházy.

As a prominent leader of the nearly one million Hungarians of the Highlands (Felvidék) who were torn to Czechoslovakia after Trianon, he began his political career as President of the National Christian Socialist Party in 1932. He was elected as a member of the Prague parliament in 1935 and worked as a defender of the rights of the Hungarian ethnic group until 1945. Based on his idea of the “Hungarian family of Slovakia”, he saw and served all strata of the Slovakian Hungarian society as one whole, in his own words, “regardless of gender, race or creed”. In addition, he played a significant role in the development of the Hungarian art life in (Czech) Slovakia and never forgot to patronise literacy and art.

Despite the constant attacks on his person, he never ceased to promote the importance of the Central European (especially the Hungarian-Slovak) destined community and reconciliation. He did not only call the Slovak people

12 Dr. Molnár, Imre is a sociologist, historian, and diplomat.

a brotherly nation in words but also helped the Slovak nationality in Hungary to live and survive through concrete actions.

In 1939, he was actively involved in the reception of Polish refugees in Hungary, for which he was placed under police surveillance in the newly created Slovakia, where he was long denied the official registration of his party. Therefore, he could only communicate with party supporters through personal visits or the Hungarian press. He built his politics on the Christian, national and social triple pillar. With the slogan "Our sign is the cross!" he rejected Nazi and Arrow Cross ideology, but he also condemned the practices of the communist state based on Bolshevik ideology. As the only Hungarian member of the Slovak parliament, he was the only one who, in 1942, rejected the law on the deportation of Jews. Subsequently, he saved the lives of many persecuted Jews by sending them to Hungary. Hunted by the Gestapo, he was arrested by the Arrow Cross and sentenced to six months in prison in Slovakia by the Tiso regime. During the last months of the war, he hid in Bratislava.

After 1945, voluntarily accepting the persecution and suffering that awaited him, instead of leaving for the West, he went to the Commissioner for the Interior, Gustáv Husák, to protest the persecution and disenfranchisement of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia because of the Beneš decrees. In response, he was arrested and then handed over to the NKVD, where he was deported to the Soviet Union along with thousands of his fellow Hungarians from Felvidék (Highlands), where he was sentenced to 10 years' hard labour in Moscow. During his imprisonment in the gulag, he was sentenced to death by hanging in 1947 in Bratislava. However, after four years, he was transported back to Czechoslovakia, seriously ill, to serve his sentence, where the communist authorities commuted his death sentence from a pardon to life imprisonment. Esterházy served his people for twelve years as a Christian politician by vocation and then suffered twelve years in communist prisons. Finally, as a witness of Christian humanity and love for his neighbour, he died a martyr's death in the spirit of holiness on 8 March 1957 in Mírov prison in Moravia, praying for his people and his enemies alike. After Esterházy's death, who offered his life and slow torture to God in penance, the authorities were not even willing to release his remains to his family.¹³ His funeral could only take

13 Molnár, Imre: *Esterházy János élete és mártírhalála*. Budapest, Méry Ratio Kiadó, 2022, 443.

place sixty years after his death, following his will, in his native Zoboralja (Zobor Valley).

Esterházy was a laic believer in Christ in politics. From the very beginning, he considered as his vocation and his creed to defend the cross “inherited from our ancestors” (the Christian faith), the land (the native land) and the men who lived on it.

“The great treasure of our heart and soul, our national consciousness, and our faith in Christ our Lord, must not be lost from our sight for a moment. Let us cherish and preserve it because it is the only positive value that no one can take away and whose magical power will help us through the most difficult trials”.¹⁴ His political vocation was based on the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, and he pursued it with a vocation born of his deep Christian faith. Towards the end of the Second World War, he did not flee to the West even as the Soviet army approached because his principle was that in the difficult times ahead, he must remain with those whom he had represented, his compatriots. Count János Esterházy was aware of what awaited him, yet he remained in his native Slovakia. His decision to take up his cross, and the persecution, humiliation, and seemingly endless suffering entailed was a decision of faith.

The Crossroads: he chooses to follow Jesus...

In the spring of 1945, with the “liberation” of the territory by the Soviet army, he came to a crossroads where he realised that he could not continue his life and his political work and that there was no way forward. The only solution was to leave for the West, but, faithful to his vocation, he gave up the possibility of escape and stayed. He knew that those entrusted to him would need him in the difficult times ahead. This is what he refers to in his last circular as a politician, written after his return from the Arrow Cross arrest in Budapest: “I have come to the fore again under difficult circumstances, but I have unwavering faith in the God of the Hungarians that he will help me, and through me the whole Hungarian family here”.¹⁵ At the crossroads that awaited him in 1945, he chose

¹⁴ *Új Hírek*, Pozsony, 1940. Karácsonyi szám, 1.

¹⁵ From János Esterházy’s last official circular letter to the Hungarian Party organisations, 1945. II. 21. In: Molnár: *Esterházy János élete és mártírhalála*. Budapest, Méry Ratio Kiadó, 2022. 281.

the upward path towards God. Out of his faith and love for those entrusted to him, he consciously chose the path of sacrifice, like his Master Jesus, who once sacrificed his life for people out of love. It was the same sacrificial love that led János Esterházy to follow Jesus to Calvary and offer himself as a sacrifice to God. This is how he reported it in a letter to his sister Lujza:

“Towards the end of the war, about the time when the siege of Pest began, I began to pray that the good God would allow me to become worthy, at the cost of suffering and privation, to follow Him in purification. And because I asked for this, I prayed when the Russians took me away, and later on, I was completely calm – and when I felt that my situation was very difficult – I simply told myself not to despair but to rejoice because the Lord Jesus had heard my request.”¹⁶

Reflecting on János Esterházy’s letter, László Paxy, a late Catholic priest from the Highlands (Felvidék), asks the question, “Could he not have done more for his people by going out west, as so many others have done, and working there for the good of his people? Was it the right thing to do to stay here and endure the sea of suffering and martyrdom? If one weighs his/her decisions and solutions regarding his/her short life on earth and puts sacrifice and love last, then one can judge the count’s behaviour as clumsy and reckless. This, however, is a pagan view of life, which sees foolishness in the cross and suffering and rejects life as alien, meaningless, sacrifice, and manifestation of love. Therefore, the behaviour and sacrifice of János Esterházy, seen from a Christian point of view, is heroic.”¹⁷ He himself was aware of all this, for he had said in an earlier speech that serving his people required sacrifice. “We have also learned from history that an endeavour can triumph only with martyrs.”¹⁸ The more the probations of those entrusted to him increased, the more he became determined to show solidarity out of love with his people and to share the cross of their suffering, rather than shrink back.¹⁹

16 From János Esterházy’s letter to his sister Lujza from the epidemic hospital in Bratislava.

In: *Isten Szolgája Esterházy János Emlékkönyv III.*, METEM, Budapest, 2021., 50.

17 *Ib.*: 61., Paxy László: *Üzenet a rabkórházból.*

18 *Esti Újság*, 1935. V. 14. 1.

19 The Beneš decrees and the government programme of the new Czechoslovak Republic promulgated in Košice condemned the whole Hungarian community of the Highlands (Felvidék) to total disenfranchisement and expulsion from the country based on the principle of collective guilt.

This acceptance of suffering began in his life towards his closest loved ones. After his arrest in Bratislava, he experienced his first ordeal of torture and interrogation in the cellar of the Railway Directorate in Kempelen Street, which he later reported to his loved ones in a letter in the following way: “Even when I was sitting in the cellar of Kempelen Street and became acquainted with the system of my hosts (i.e., starvation and various tortures, beatings – MI), I shuddered to think that you too would come in the same situation... And here I truly say that I almost went crazy thinking that children should go through such suffering. And I prayed, asking the most merciful Heart of the Lord Jesus to protect you – and this concern for you and the children was the concern of the father, the parent, for his innocent children.”²⁰

This is “the same spirit that was in Jesus”, writes Father Paxy: Jesus was not bound by his own suffering, but by the fate of those for whom he had undertaken a sea of suffering and humiliation... This suffering love, oblivious to himself, concerned for his loved ones, pervades the whole of János Esterházy’s letter and bears witness to his selfless love, strengthened and muscled by the sufferings and trials he endured in prison.”²¹

In his fate, the prisoner Esterházy thus took upon himself the suffering of his loved ones and, trusting in the mercy of the heart of Jesus, who suffered for us, prayed for his loved ones. For the same reason, he also took upon himself the false accusations of his condemnation in Moscow, where he was threatened that if he did not sign the indictment, his loved ones would be deported there as well. By accepting the non-existent guilt²² of the indictment, he saved his loved ones from the suffering that awaited them after their deportation.

With a responsibility similar to his fatherly concern for his children and family, he thought of the Hungarian ethnic group in Slovakia, whose members he consistently referred to as his brothers and sisters and whose suffering he also wished to alleviate.²³ This spirit accompanied him through the many prison camps and prisons that engulfed him. It was during the cruel treatment in the Soviet Union that he became aware of the power of faith and prayer

20 Op. cit.: Esterházy János pozsonyi, 50.

21 Op. cit.: Paxy, *Üzenet*, 62.

22 He was an advisor to Hitler, led a fascist party, organised an anti-Soviet partisan fight, was a British spy, etc.

23 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Esterházy*, 281.

to overcome the cruellest prison conditions and to assure him of God's comforting closeness in the most terrible circumstances.

In Moscow, after ten years in a forced labour camp, deprived of everything of earthly value (even his clothes)²⁴, he had to start his life anew in a death camp in Siberia. However, they could not deprive him of his faith. This is clear from the first message he sent to his family as a sign of life, which informed his loved ones of his fate and whereabouts only two years after his deportation. The following message was a note sent through Poland in the autumn of 1947, which reads in Polish:

“János asks you to let his mother (Etus, his children – János, Alice and Lulu) know I am in good health. I got 10. [...] I will not lose my faith. The Lord God and all our saints are helping me here. I pray for you all. I bless and embrace you all. Bibi.”²⁵ This message - which amounts to a confession of faith - was not written merely to console those back home but contains a real-life experience. It was testified to by his fellow prisoner, Mihály Csáky (who was taken to the gulag with him) after his miraculous release: “Conditions there were more deplorable and deplorable. The prisoners who had come from Central Europe, some more quickly, some more slowly, gradually lost all hope of being human and were broken down in body and soul. Not so Esterházy. As the others sank, he rose, growing day by day and, from a public man, becoming in the noblest sense of the word: a man... He laid aside human frailties, and cared only for higher, holier aims... his deep Christian faith, his unshakeable Hungarian conviction, and his boundless confidence in the triumph of justice, he devoted to the consolation and uplift of his fellow prisoners.”²⁶

While seriously ill, his organism infected with Siberian TBC, Esterházy met another Hungarian prisoner, József Hetényi, who had been deported from Vas County as a young man of just 16, in a sanitary camp called Sangorodok Protok. From his recollections, it is known that the physically “pitifully emaciated”, “bone and skin” János Esterházy “bore his sufferings with wonderful patience”

24 Along the way, his fellow prisoners stole everything he owned, so he arrived at the camp naked, wearing a shabby soldier's coat (which they threw on him). In: Molnár Imre: *Kegyelem életfogytig. Esterházy János szenvedéstörténetének dokumentumai Mycielski Esterházy Mária feljegyzései alapján* (3rd edition), Budapest, METEM, 2021, 45.

25 The name Bibi is Esterházy's childhood nickname. In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt. Isten szolgája Esterházy János élete és vértanúsága*, Alsóbodok, 2020, 25.

26 Csáky, Mihály: *Hősiesség a XX. században. Új Hungária*, 1959. V. 30, 1.

and that despite his severe lung disease, he “radiated spiritual energy”. As he called Esterházy, the “suffering Christ of the Hungarians”, in his description and testimony, no one heard Esterházy complain about his fate. Instead, it was he who comforted and exhorted his fellow prisoners to do good.²⁷

Countless criminals were with him in the camps, whose company caused him further suffering. “They swore, cursed, spoke obscenities, and mocked János for praying.”²⁸ In the end, the guards noticed how much he prayed, but they did not hurt him for it. They thought he was a priest. His spiritual life in the Soviet camps began to deepen, and he reached a level of contemplation that his later priest and fellow monk prisoners could only speak of with admiration and deep respect.²⁹

Thus, János Esterházy, with his deepening faith and through prayer, clung to the Lord God, whose presence and help he had experienced countless times. At the same time, his hope and trust in God grew and strengthened in his soul. After returning to Bratislava, during a visit to the prison, his sister Maria wrote to their sister Luisa in Paris: “When I told him that Franek wanted to change jobs and that he needed prayer, he simply replied, ‘well, we will pray’. He said this in a tone as if he were responding to someone’s request that he was convinced he was going fulfil. “You can really have a very close and intimate relationship with Him.”³⁰ That may sound silly, but it’s really true.”³¹

In the spring of 1949, after his return from the gulag, János Esterházy was briefly hospitalised, where he was free to write a few letters to his loved ones. In one of these letters, he also described who were the “all our saints” who often joined him in presenting a prayer request from the heavenly hosts: “Now, my dear Maminkom and Lulkom, I will write to you in what order and from whom I have asked for help all this time, at least twice a day:

Lord Jesus’ holly heart, the Beatified Virgin Mary’s holly heart, my guarding angel, St. Teréz and István Kaszap (together), St. John the Evang., St. Josef, St. Thomas, St. Peter, St. Paul ap., St. Jacob ap., St. Benedict, St. Gellert, St.

27 Hetényi, József: A magyarok szenvedő Krisztusa volt. In.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 156–159.

28 Op. cit.: Molnár, *Kegyelem*, 49.

29 Orosch, János: Ne féljünk szentnek nevezni Esterházy Jánost, In. <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2021/10/orosch-janos-prekonceptioink-rabjai-vagyunk>

30 That is, with the God.

31 Op. cit: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 85.

Stephen, St. Stephen the King, St. Imre, St. Lazarus, St. Lazarus the King, St. Mary the Great of Hungary, St. Margaret the Princess, St. Elizabeth of the House of Árpád, St. Hedwig the Queen, St. Elizabeth, St. Anne, St. Mary the Virgin of Dzików,³² St. Stanislaw Kostka, St. Andrzej Bobola, St. Kinga, Matka Boska Czestochowska, Matka Boska Ostrobramska,³³ St. Francis, St. Ignác, St. Anthony, St. Alajos, St. Ilona, Virgin Mary of Fatima, Virgin Mary of Lourdes, Virgin Mary of the Valley, Virgin Mary of Chisimlyo. And how mercifully they helped me and listened to my requests.”³⁴

For the Servant of God, prayer was, therefore, the medium in which his relationship with God was strengthened and fulfilled. After his release, some of his fellow prisoners personally reported to Maria that “...he actually prays all day long.”³⁵ Another companion told us that János: “prays most of the time, used to (when he could – MI) serve the altar, read the newspaper, sometimes he would joke or tell them something instructive.”³⁶

On his return from the gulag, the letters he wrote to his loved ones reveal the intentions for which the Servant of God János Esterházy prayed, clinging more and more to Christ in the hell of the Soviet camps. Let us see his prayer intentions in order.

For himself

As a practising politician, in 1939, Esterházy spoke of the values he professed for himself in a statement he made: “We are living very serious and hard times, in which we have a greater responsibility to our God, to our Nation, to our family, to our ancestors and ourselves. But we accept this responsibility... because we have unshaken trust and faith in divine truth”³⁷ János Esterházy, the last person to mention himself in his statement, in the suffering of his captivity, experiencing his weakness and frailty, “thought of himself too, prayed

32 A sacred image in the chapel of the Tarnowski family castle in Dzików.

33 An icon of the Virgin Mary of Ostrobrama can be seen at the Polish national shrine in Wilno.

34 From János Esterházy’s letter, written to his mother and sister Lujza on 24 May 1949 (manuscript).

35 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 173.

36 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 175.

37 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Esterházy*, 287.

for himself too". True, not for his health, not even for his release, but for the most important thing: that he might be well prepared for his descending with God, which could happen at any time under the cruel conditions of the gulag.³⁸ "I feared most of all that I should die without holy confession and holy communion. And so I prayed to St. Teresa and István Kaszap every day that they would make it possible for me to confess to the Lord Jesus before my death and to receive Holy Communion ... if I could not confess and receive Holy Communion before my death, they would make it possible for me to be conscious until my last moment so that with their help I could pray devoutly until my last moment and repent of my sins so that I might be saved".³⁹

For the Servant of God János Esterházy, it was more important than anything else to be in a state of grace when called away from this life on earth. It was not a state or a moment he feared but a relationship that he lived from and that sustained him. The life of grace that sustained and nourished him in the gulag through spiritual communion and later, in the prisons of Czechoslovakia, through real sacramental encounters. In his profound humility, he also knew that he could not persevere and remain in it by his own strength. Therefore, he implored the saints' help and intercession and relied on those who had passed the test successfully, because they had received the necessary spiritual power and on whose heavenly help he could rely.

For the forgiveness of sins

In his several letters to his loved ones, János Esterházy repeatedly refers to the grace of repentance, which he considered more important than any other request. For him, repentance is an incentive and goes hand in hand with the gift of the grace of being able to bear the cross. "I have only one big request of you. Pray that I may be able to pray truly devoutly, to repent of my sins with perfect sorrow, and to bear my cross with humility and joy. I ask this of you very much, and thank you very much in advance."⁴⁰

38 Op. cit.: Paxy: *Üzenet*, 64.

39 A letter from János Esterházy, 1949, In: *Isten szolgája*, 52. János Esterházy's request was granted at the moment of his death. See also: Ján Janků tanúságtételét. In: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 195–166.

40 From János Esterházy's letter to his sister Lujza, written on 24 May 1949 (manuscript).

“Only a soul that has stepped out of itself, that has left the shell of selfishness, can have compassion for its fellow human beings and appreciate all that God has done and is doing for us,” Father Paxy writes in his reflection on this subject, and then continues: “Suffering, if we accept it with the spirit of János Esterházy, will show us our misery, not to make us despair, but to lead us to true repentance and to give us food for prayer. The count learned to pray, and his prayers were powerful.”⁴¹

About his return home

Considering his return home, he also had his own specific internal journey. He wanted to return home, but he had more important goals. He wrote about this in a letter to Lujza: “But if I cannot return home, pray to the Lord Jesus Christ so that he graciously allow me to attend mass in the mornings and receive Holy Communion as often as possible (wherever it shall be), so that, strengthened by the reception of the most glorious body of the Lord Jesus, I may live a deeply religious, catholic life, a life of Manresa⁴², in possession of sanctifying grace, so that I may be the Lord Jesus’s in my life and then his in my death. Then I asked to be allowed to have a Missal⁴³ and a Prayer Book of Manresa, so that I could pray better with the help of those.”⁴⁴

So, in the midst of his unjust sufferings, János Esterházy clung to God. He turned to the Hungarian-Polish saints, and St. Teresa Minor and István Kaszap for help. And through their intercession, what did he ask for from God in the hell of the gulag? Freedom as a prisoner suffering in a prison camp? No! As an innocent man, justice, or rehabilitation? No! As a count, the recovery of his wealth or prosperity for himself? No! As a politician, power? No! These and similar worldly concepts are not mentioned in his letter. Instead, he asks to be admitted to Holy Confession and Holy Communion and to be able to pray until the hour of his death so that he may be saved. And the Lord’s answer is not delayed:

41 Op. cit.: Paxy: *Üzenet*, 62.

42 A quiet, spiritual life.

43 A prayer book containing the parts of the Holy Mass.

44 From János Esterházy’s letter, In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.*, 53.

“And today, my sweet Lulko, I am in hospital in Bratislava (not at home). There is a chapel where mass is celebrated every day (6 a.m. on weekdays and 7 a.m. on Sundays, but I don’t go every day because that would be a bit tiring), there is a Missal (which was formerly yours), and Mariska will bring a Prayer Book of Manresa... Well, if that’s not wonderful and one hundred per cent hearing of prayers, nothing is. Well, it is impossible not to tearfully thank you for so much grace and mercy”⁴⁵, writes János Esterházy in a letter to his sister Lujza, with a heart and soul full of gratitude.

For fellow sufferers

In a letter written to his relatives after his return home, in brief, freer conditions of the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Bratislava, Esterházy also wrote about his young fellow prisoners who had been subjected to similar cruel conditions in the gulag as he was, and whom he “felt very sorry for”. This feeling of pity and solidarity led him to try to help them with his only weapon, the power of prayer. Here is a description of one such case in the words of a servant of God himself:

“In 1946, when I was in the camp where I met Leosia⁴⁶, I was living in a barrack with a young Latvian boy (19 years old). His name was Peter Janulatis (Reformed). ... When I got to the hospital, I was very sick because I had a fever of 40 degrees in the morning. ... When I got better after a few days, I saw that my little friend was so weak that he could not move, could not eat anything, and was suffering terribly. I asked the doctor what was wrong with him, and he told me the boy was in the hospital with pleurisy. Then it developed into pus pneumonia, and on top of that, the boy has cavernous TBC, and his heart is not where it is in people in general but much to the right and so weak and disordered that it could give out at any moment. Moreover, his lungs and stomach are in such a state that he is beyond saving – a few days, and it is all over. I believed it because he looked terrible. He was practically unconscious and hadn’t eaten anything. I felt very sorry for him. And then I decided to say a ninth to Little St. Teresa and István Kaszap. Since I was still very weak and

45 *Ib.*: 53.

46 She was probably a nurse of Polish origin who helped Esterházy send letters to his loved ones.

tired of praying, I thought that if I prayed to the two of them together, they would accept this too. Unfortunately, I don't remember exactly what day I started, so I don't know what day the novena⁴⁷ ended, but somehow, I started at the end of January and ended at the beginning of February. So, I started the prayers – one day after the other passed, the child's condition was unchanged, not eating and pretty much unconscious. The doctor was amazed that the child was still alive because she thought he must have been dead by now – and I prayed and kept my fingers crossed. The eighth day passed, and the situation remained unchanged. That day the doctor said he had 1-2 days at most. On the morning of the ninth day, I peeked over from my bed to his bed. He was lying in a trance and moaning. I prayed my regular prayers and started the last round of novena at the end. I finished and then fell asleep for a bit. I woke up after a while (I don't know what time it was because we didn't have a clock) and looked over at the little boy's bed – I saw the boy half sitting up in his bed! I can tell you that in the hour I finished the novena, the boy's health suddenly changed completely – from being in an awkward, lethargic state for days, dying, I would say, without any transition, to a stage of recovery that amazed everyone, but especially the doctor. That very day he began to eat well, his pain had completely disappeared, and a week later, he was up. In March, he was taken for an X-ray, and it was found that his cavernous sinuses were completely closed. From then until my coming (15. II. 1949), we were together, and he was perfectly healthy, smoked cigarettes and went out in the coldest weather. He was completely cured."⁴⁸ "The sudden and inexplicable recovery of the Latvian boy is marvellous, but even more marvellous is the faith and trust which led the count to fight with all his heart and soul for the life of a young man who was a stranger to him when by all human reckoning the boy's condition was utterly hopeless. What was this but the struggle of hope against hopelessness, the struggle of the soul against the misery of the body? [...] It is a testimony to the noble spirit of Count János Esterházy that before he begs for his own cure, he fights and prays with an intensity never experienced before for the life of a Latvian boy of another denomination.

47 It is a series of prayers over nine days.

48 From János Esterházy's letter, In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.* 51–52.

What is this but a selfless Christian love that forgets itself and is exemplary for us?" writes Father Paxy in his commentary.⁴⁹

This opinion is reinforced by a small episode concerning Esterházy, which took place in the police detention centre in Bratislava immediately after his repatriation, and which was reported by a close acquaintance of the family, Uncle Slovak, to János's sister Maria: "He told her in tears how he had heard how ill János was, and how he was looking after the health of his fellow prisoners. Since he was not given a (special) glass of his own in the police prison, he preferred not to drink for three days not to infect the others. Unbelievable (but true)!"⁵⁰

In his diary, Mária noted that in the gulag, one of her brother's fellow prisoners recovered from a severe case of scurvy by János "giving him his onion portion", which he had received in a package from the widow of a seriously ill Polish professor, who was also a fellow prisoner and whom he nursed till death in the hospital barracks.⁵¹ From the recollections of Mihály Csáky, who was taken away with him, it is known that the prisoner János Esterházy "was in the same miserable fate as the others, yet he found a way to help them, to share his insufficient lunch, to give them advice and to set an example."⁵² This was also reported by Béla Tészár, who was deported with Esterházy but returned to Bratislava from gulag imprisonment, who, in his narrative to Maria, "also emphasised his (Esterházy's) selflessness and generosity, as well as his solidarity with his fellow prisoners. For example, after the sentencing, they put them and a bunch of strangers into some big room, 70–80 people, who fought over the bunks, of which there were too few. He just stood there and didn't want to go to bed first, only when he saw that his eleven people had already got a bed. Or on one occasion when Béla's neighbour stole his bread at night – they got 60 dkg for the whole day, and no more, János shared his own portion with him!"⁵³ But it was not just their health he looked after. After his return from the gulag in Bratislava, his sister recalled, he spoke out in defence

49 Op. cit.: Paxy: *Üzenet*, 63–64.

50 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 38.

51 Ib.: 54.

52 Op. cit.: Csáky: *Hösiesség*, 1.

53 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 111.

of a fellow patient in the Infectious Diseases Hospital to a doctor “who treated the patient almost inhumanely”.⁵⁴

Saving the guilty

His fellow prisoner, József Hetényi, noted that the physically broken János Esterházy, “like a good father”, as soon as his strength allowed him, began to educate his young Hungarian prisoner. Since their spiritual salvation was important to him, he felt as his moral duty, in addition to prayer, to use his words of admonition and fatherly love to guide his fellow prisoners to the right path “since prostitution was terrible in the camp”. In his own account of his activities, he writes: “Since prostitution was terrible in the camp because we were locked together, men and women, I felt it my duty to discourage the Hungarians from it. However, since, in order to commit this greatest sin (which caused so much pain to the Lord Jesus), the children needed money, which they could only get by selling their bread, I told them the following: ‘Boys, you are hungry and pray to the Lord God every day for ‘our daily bread’ etc. And the Lord God is so infinitely merciful and will give you the bread of life every day. And what do you do with this bread that the Lord God so mercifully gives you? You sell the bread, and with the money you get for it, you buy a huge whip and, in your wickedness, you go, and you personally start to whip the Lord Jesus Christ who is so infinitely merciful to you, who loves you so much – think if you call life here suffering, what is the Lord Jesus suffering for your ingratitude and your wickedness?’ And it was incredibly powerful. Finally, they completely abandoned all such filthiness, so we lived in true friendship and love. I was the eldest, and everybody called me Uncle János. I loved them very much – and my heart was very heavy when they stayed there.”⁵⁵ No wonder, for János Esterházy not only raised and comforted his fellow prisoners with thoughtful love but also shared their fate, sharing his own ration of bread with them when necessary. The inhuman world of the gulag did not extinguish János Esterházy’s love for his fellow man as a politician, but it can be confidently said that his deep prayer life made it even more visible and strengthened it. “It was through this love that he made his fellow prisoners renounce the sin of fornication, a miracle of grace. Anyone

54 *Ib.*: 57.

55 From János Esterházy’s letter, In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.* 53.

who can be so distressed by the moral fall of his fellow human beings is very much like his Master, Jesus, who agonised and sweated blood when he thought of the sins of the world”, writes Father Paxy.⁵⁶ Indeed, in a letter to one of Mariska’s mothers, he also describes a similar experience of his brother’s spiritual conduct. He pitied those who had ever wronged him and pained that many people had offended God in this way.⁵⁷ When he was unexpectedly taken back to prison in Bratislava after a relatively free stay in the hospital, János Esterházy did not despair and concerned himself with his own situation. One of the first requests he received, his sister Maria notes, was for “books and a Slovak mass book for someone he wants to convert.”⁵⁸ there in prison. Seeing the depth of his prayer life, one can be sure that when János Esterházy warned his fellow prisoners, besides their physical conditions, of the seriousness of their spiritual condition, he did so with true love, in alliance with his heavenly helpers and “prayed for sinners as Jesus once did on the cross.”⁵⁹

Atonement and goodwill

His sister, Maria, met her brother, János, in June 1949, in the epidemic hospital in Bratislava, after four years. This is how she recounted their moving meeting with family members who were then living in the West:

“This man who has come back is no longer the one who was taken away. On the contrary, this is a completely dissimilar man, with a vast difference from the one before. Nobler, more disciplined, tried by suffering, from which he emerged victorious with God’s help. With a spirit totally focused on God. One hundred per cent man, one hundred per cent Catholic. How could I recognise him, for all the suffering and struggle he has endured have destroyed his physical being.”⁶⁰

On seeing her brother again, Mária was pained to discover his physical disfigurement (caused by suffering) and his brokenness, but she was also

56 Op. cit.: Paxy: *Üzenet*, 66.

57 János Esterházy *węgiersko-polski meczennik.*, Budapest-Warszawa, METEM, 2014., 47.

58 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 60.

59 Op. cit.: Paxy: *Üzenet*, 66.

60 Op. cit.: János Esterházy, *węgiersko-polski*, 36.

happy to see his spiritual rebirth.⁶¹ As if reflecting on this, the Servant of God János Esterházy wrote to his sister Lujza: “I have returned, and today I am as I was formed to be by the most fervent heart of our Lord Jesus, at the request [prayers] of Mama, You and Mariska – I know that I have undergone a great change-but I cannot and must not be praised for it – “even today when I have undergone this change, I am so infinitely far from being so true that our Lord Jesus could have the joy of me”.⁶²

What, then, did the sincerest heart of Jesus shape him into? One might ask this based on the passage above. To find the answer, it is necessary to turn again to Esterházy, who, even in the hell of suffering that surrounded him, saw his main task in the ministry of atonement and sacrifice. To this end, he asked his loved ones for spiritual support and a prayer shelter: “And I can only ask you, through your very effective prayers, to ask the Lord Jesus, the good Virgin Mary, St Teresa and István Kazsap to give me grace and strength and perseverance so that I may make atonement and fulfil my good intentions.”⁶³

At first sight, it is astonishing that János Esterházy did not ask Lujza to pray for his freedom from the terrible suffering of the unjust imprisonment but to be able to make atonement to the Lord Jesus and to fulfil his good wishes (i.e., his offerings) even under such circumstances.

Lujza Esterházy was aware of what is meant by ‘my good intentions’ in her brother’s letter, for in her reply, she hastened to assure her brother: “yes, you may rest assured that I will fulfil your request and pray for you with all my heart, that the grace of the good God may give you strength and encouragement to fulfil your good intentions.”⁶⁴

The vow of God’s servant, János Esterházy, under the title “goodwill”, also contains the offer of life. One proof of this is the short biographical summary of the most important moments of János Esterházy’s life, written by Lujza on behalf of the family in Paris on 15 March 1957, shortly after receiving the news of his brother’s death. It contains the following lines: “According to his freed fellow prisoners, against all odds, János Esterházy kept the spirit in us. And he often said: ‘I gladly bear my sufferings and offer them to God in

61 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 48.

62 From János Esterházy’s letter, In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.* 50.

63 Ib.: 50.

64 Lujza Esterházy’s reply to her brother János. In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.*, 56.

supplication for Hungary and the other prisoner countries, that they may be free and happy.”⁶⁵ Indeed, in a letter to Mária, written on 20 May 1955 after the general amnesty had failed for him, he wrote the following, speaking of himself (because of censorship) in the third person: “He has accepted the new difficulties imposed on him with great calm, for he is in a very good spiritual balance and mood. He has accepted everything with gratitude because he trusts that in this way, he is contributing to a better and easier fate for his loved ones.”⁶⁶

In one of his last authorised letters, also speaking of himself in the third person, he wrote to Mária: “Tell him not to worry about Muki.⁶⁷ I know him well, and I know that he is happy to work⁶⁸ for the betterment of Livia⁶⁹ and Totot.”⁷⁰ These words of the Servant of God can be boldly compared to the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “I suffer for you with joy, and I make up in my body what is lacking in Christ’s suffering for the good of his body, the Church” (Col 1,24).

Lujza Esterházy and other family members were no strangers to the concept of atonement and the offering of suffering ordeals. I found the following text of atonement in Lujza’s bequest, the contents of which were presumably shared between the Esterházy brothers in spiritual agreement: “Lord, out of love for you, I gladly bear the loss of home: in atonement for the destruction of countless homes, and supplication that souls may reach their heavenly home and that here on earth we may revive the fires of homes which have been extinguished. Out of love for you, Lord, I gladly bear the loss of our possessions: in atonement for the sins so many people commit for the sake of material goods and in supplication that human hearts may see in you their

65 From Lujza Esterházy’s manuscript, owned by the author.

66 From János Esterházy’s prison letter written on 20 May 1955 (manuscript). The general amnesty for political prisoners, introduced on 1 May 1955, the 10th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia, did not apply to János Esterházy. In this disappointment, he also offered his suffering for ‘his own.’

67 The pseudonym given by János Esterházy to himself in order to circumvent the censorship is derived from the Czech abbreviation MUKL, which stands for “Muž určený k likvidaci” = a person designated for liquidation.

68 In other words, he suffers.

69 For Hungary and the people who live there.

70 For Slovakia and the people who live there.

greatest good and that you may give them all daily bread. Lord, out of love for you, I gladly endure the persecution of other nations in atonement for the sins so many committed in the name of national interest and in supplication that the hearts of men may conform their national service to your law, so that peace may be established according to your heart. Amen.”⁷¹

“I believe that God is sending a message to this day through the life of János Esterházy: accepting the suffering and offering it for our fellow human beings is a powerful force, it can achieve more than often spectacular deeds,” – wrote one of his admirers in response to a ‘round-robin’ question about Esterházy on EWTN Catholic television.

These additional virtues are considered to be among the fruits of the profound prayer life of János Esterházy, the servant of God, based on his letters and testimonies. As an integral part of his prayer life, János Esterházy expressed his longing for the Eucharist on several occasions. In this respect, he looked to his sister Lujza’s enthusiasm as a role model. He himself testified to this in a letter written in 1949 from the prison hospital in Bratislava: “I have always seen you, my dear, kneeling before the altar in the church in Nové Lázne, making the sign of the cross before and after Holy Communion because I have been watching you for a long time and I noticed that I have never seen anyone make communion with such a happy and joyful face and make the sign of the cross so beautifully, which has had a great effect on me at that time and contributed greatly to my beginning to come to Holy Communion more often.”⁷² And that the good example was effective is confirmed by Lujza in the part of her memoirs where she described their (last) meeting in the Bratislava police prison after her brother János’s arrest: “I understood now what this peaceful glow in his eyes was: it was his faith that kept him alive. Of course, he had always been a believer, like many of his contemporaries. But in the months before his arrest, I noticed that his faith had become much deeper; he had not missed a single Sunday mass since the previous summer.”⁷³

His sister Mária reports that “There [in the gulag] he also observed First Fridays and performed spiritual devotions at other times, but always on First Fridays and tried to find out when Easter was, although it was very difficult

71 Esterházy, Lujza: Engesztelő felajánlás, In: *A mi jelünk a keresztt.* 70–71.

72 Esterházy, János pozsonyi.... In: *A mi jelünk a keresztt.* 50.

73 Esterházy, Lujza: *Szívek az ár ellen*, Budapest, Püski, 1991, 164.

because of the lack of a calendar and the difference between the two.”⁷⁴ As indicated above, one of János Esterházy’s regular prayer requests was: “I might again confess and receive Holy Communion.” After his return home, his request was granted, which he reported to his sister with great joy and gratitude: “I am writing hastily, for I am overjoyed: yesterday I made universal confession and was blessed for the first time in more than four years [during his imprisonment in the Soviet gulag], and this morning I went to mass and Holy Communion. In the whole four years, I have not cried once, but when I was absolved by the priest, and even when I took the holiest body of our Lord Jesus, I shed tears. And I don’t know where to begin with prayers of thanksgiving and further supplications – so much grace and so infinite mercy that the Good Lord has shown me is truly unbelievable.”⁷⁵

Up until 1951, Czechoslovak prisons allowed inmates to offer Holy Mass. After that, however, imprisoned priests were only allowed to perform Holy Mass secretly. For Esterházy, his sister Mária sent in the Eucharist baked in bread in a ration packet on rare occasions when it was allowed. However, this method also carried the risk of sacrilege as the guards confiscated the contents of the parcel more than once. On several occasions during this period, Esterházy was sentenced to solitary confinement for “staying in other cells against orders.”⁷⁶ His fellow prisoners at Leopoldov said that Esterházy was in another cell when the priests who were held there were secretly celebrating mass for the prisoners.

The testimony of one of his fellow prisoners, the papal chaplain Károly Lénár, who was sentenced to twelve years in prison, reads as follows: “I met him in the prison hospital in Leopoldov. There, too, he set an example for others. In Lipótvár, we celebrated mass in secret on the prison iron bed, and our most trusted civilian prisoners – led by Count Esterházy – distributed the Blessed Sacrament to the other prisoners.”⁷⁷

74 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 48.

75 From János Esterházy’s letter, written in the epidemic hospital in Bratislava on 24 May 1949 (manuscript).

76 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Esterházy*, 346.

77 The testimony of Mons. Károly Lénár, a papal chaplain in the Hungarian documentary entitled *Triptychon* (Budapest 2021, Directed by Dezső Zsigmond).

The testimony of a Redemptorist monk, Father Ján Mastiliak, about Esterházy was recorded by František Mikloško: “after the secret masses, the ‘transubstantiated’ bread (i.e., the Blessed Sacrament – MI) was given to the seriously ill Esterházy for safekeeping. Whenever possible, he preferred to leave the cell and stay in the corridor when he heard harsh words from the prisoners in the cell, not to be in the company of the obscene-speaking prisoners together with the ‘Holy Bread’.”⁷⁸ In this connection, the former fellow prisoner already quoted, Father Károly Lénár, described Esterházy as “a walking sacristan.”⁷⁹ Father Ján Mastiliak, in a brief recollection of this period,⁸⁰ recalls that János Esterházy always kept with him a Polish edition of *Following Christ* by Thomas Kempis and the letters of St. Cyprian, which were a great reinforcement and encouragement to his fellow prisoners. The following quote from the letter could be a catechesis for those who suffer for confessing their faith: “Christ is with you in person, rejoicing in the perseverance of His servants who, following His footsteps, are walking His way towards the kingdom of heaven! Every day you may happily look forward to the joyful day of your departure, and, departing from this world, you may be on your way to the reward of martyrdom, the heavenly home; you may see after the darkness of the world the brightest light, all your struggles and sufferings shall be rewarded with the glory due to it.”⁸¹

Yes, in the few letters that remained after János Esterházy, there are several self-confident statements confirming the words of St. Cyprian: “Christ is with you in person”. For example, he wrote in a letter on 24 May 1949: “The mercy of the Good God has been with me all the time...” At the end of the same letter, he wrote: “The Lord Jesus had also helped me so evidently on so many occasions (e.g., several times when I was so hungry that I did not even know who I was and then I asked the Lord Jesus to give me, if He thought me worthy, a piece of bread) and how many times, quite unexpectedly, a short

78 Mikloško, František: *Arisztokraták. Életünk*, 1991. 6. sz., 545.

79 A narrative by Mons. Károly Lénár, papal chaplain, for Alice Esterházy Malfatti and Imre Molnár.

80 Mastiliak, Ján: *Hrst' spomienok, Slovo medzi nami*, Prešov, Redemptoristi, 2011.

81 From the letters of St Cyprian, a bishop and martyr (Epist. 60, 1-2. 5: CSEL 3, 691-692. 694-695).

time after prayer, someone I hardly knew gave me a piece of bread. And there were many such cases. But I will write about this gradually.”⁸²

Unfortunately, Esterházy could no longer write and send the detailed descriptions mentioned above, since his return from the gulag, his treatment in the epidemic hospital in Bratislava, which had provided him with relatively freer conditions for writing and had lasted barely a month, was unexpectedly interrupted. He was taken back to prison, where he could only report his health to his sister Maria in short letters with strictly censored content. Thus, further details about his mental state became known only through the snippets of censored letters, information surreptitiously communicated through authorised speakers, Mária’s personal experiences, and the fellow prisoners’ accounts. Mária wrote this information in letters to her mother and sister Lujza in France. One of these letters reveals how the secret but regular reception of the Eucharist helped her brother find peace of mind in the pains he suffered (solitary confinement, withholding of letters, etc.) and the suffering caused by his illness. Mária describes that “in spite of all this, he (János) says he does not feel bad. On the contrary, he is always content and serene, although he is the butt of bad jokes – he has not received a single letter for the holidays. And I sent four. But he receives everything with such angelic patience that one is ashamed of oneself for nagging so much. He could make sacrifices for the holidays and the New Year, and he could make preparation too.”⁸³, so nothing else mattered”.

Forgiveness, submission to God’s will

His “spiritual outstand is a miracle!”⁸⁴, Maria writes of her brother in her diary, after enduring many humiliations and the suffering that followed it in prison without a murmur, peacefully. Mária, like János’s fellow prisoners, was filled with admiration for the spirit with which Esterházy accepted the ordeal

82 From a letter written by János Esterházy to his loved ones from the Bratislava prison hospital on 24 May 1949. Unfortunately, although he promised, “similar cases were many. But I will write this gradually”, he was unable to fulfil it, as he was taken back from the relatively free prison hospital to the maximum-security prison cell a short time later.

83 He participated in the sacrament of confession.

84 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 76.

of illness and suffering that resulted from the unjust sentence he had been condemned to. "I asked him if he felt any hatred or desire for revenge against those who had inflicted such a mass of terrible suffering on him." To which his brother János replied: "Well, listen! Why? Everything is well in the way the good God wishes. If He thinks this is good, then it is good for me. Who am I to oppose the will of the good God?" The answer surprised Mária, and she recorded this surprise in her diary. "At this moment, I would have liked to kiss his hands. Surprising (although) how much he had remembered all the offences a time before! Suffering had completely transformed him. The kind and frivolous good boy had become a man and a saint through the fires of suffering, thanks to the infinite mercy of the Good God."⁸⁵ In a later letter to her mother, she adds: "He, who used to remember every insult so well, now keeps even the shadow of hatred or rejection of others far away!"⁸⁶

His fellow Czech prisoner, Ján Janků, who died in 2019, made a similar remark about him: "His tall, slender figure was conspicuous from afar in the prison corridor, where he always walked with his head high and his gaze far away. His body was lean, almost translucent. I remember his fingers in particular: there was nothing but bone and skin. He suffered a lot, but this suffering did not break him because he endured everything with great spirit and a straight back. He hardly spoke of himself. Mostly, almost always, he consoled his fellow men by talking about God and spiritual things."⁸⁷

This was confirmed by Karel Kukul, Esterházy's fellow prisoner at Leopoldov and later at Mirov, who said that all respected the Hungarian count because he did not consider himself superior to any prisoner. He made no distinction between them in terms of nationality or other affiliations. "In any case, he is now spiritually on that level when he can accept these daily hardships and sufferings with joy,"⁸⁸ After one of their meetings, Maria wrote to her sister Luisa, describing János.

But then what about all the humiliation, abuse, and torture they have suffered, often at the hands of people of other nationalities? – one might ask. "He pities

85 *Ib.*: 47.

86 *Op. cit.*: *János Esterházy wegiersko*, 47.

87 Janků, Ján: *Maradt egy befejezetlen sakkjátszmám*. In: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 159.

88 *Op. cit.*: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 178.

those who have harmed him, and it is a pain for him that many people hurt God in this way.”⁸⁹

However, János Esterházy also goes beyond the line of rejecting hatred and the desire for revenge, and even beyond the virtue of forgiveness that goes with it. In one of his letters to his mother and sister, in strictly private communication, the following is written: “Just for you to know because I forgot to tell you this (but it is a very old [dedication] from Russia): Monday is for Maminko, Tuesday, for Livia, Wednesday is for János, Thursday, for Alice, Friday is for Lulu, Saturday for You and Your Ties, Sunday is for all our benefactors and all our enemies is consecrated with prayers with rosary with communion.”⁹⁰

Reconciliation in the will of God, a penitential spirit rooted in humility, the forgiveness of those who have wronged him, the practice of the love of enemies, “which may be understood as the summit of Christianity” and the constant prayer for enemies – all this culminate in the life of a servant of God. “For me, János Esterházy is a saint of generous self-sacrifice. His secret offering gives a glimpse into the richness of his heart. He gave himself to Jesus without reservation and doubts. His unstinting commitment made him the property of those he loved and wanted to love. So also, to his enemies. For him, Sunday could be truly the Lord’s Day, for he offered the first day of the week with a heart transformed by Jesus, through much suffering and trial, by His holy Heart. To me, the most subtle and greatest proof of forgiveness and acceptance is that he not only mentions his benefactors and enemies on the same page but celebrates and thanks them on the same day. “Only those who no longer love with their own hearts can do this,” writes an admirer of his dedication.⁹¹ And indeed, in one of János’s letters to his sister, there is also the (almost apologetic) request, which is also a testimony of his closeness to God: “I ask only for God’s sake, do not praise me, my love, and let us all rejoice in what has happened because in this way we have come closer to the Heart of the Lord Jesus, and I have learned to love Him truly.”⁹²

89 Op. cit.: *János Esterházy wegiersko*, 47.

90 From János Esterházy’s letter from Leopoldov, written on 6 August 1950 (manuscript).

91 Extract from the Esterházy series on EWTN Catholic television.

92 From a letter to Lujza, János Esterházy’s sister, from the epidemic hospital in Bratislava, written on 16 June 1949 (on the Lord’s Day). In: *A mi jelünk a kereszt.*, 49.

Perhaps it was this experience of nearness to God that prompted Mária to recount to her mother one of her encounters with her brother in these words: “I swear to you, mom, that no spiritual exercise has ever had such a profound impact on me as the four hours I spent with him. We really have God to thank for that.”⁹³

Freedom of the Soul

“I don’t know where to begin the prayers of thanksgiving, and further supplications – so much grace and so infinite mercy that the Good God has bestowed on me is truly unbelievable.”⁹⁴, wrote János Esterházy to his loved ones after his return from the gulag, but still in the shadow of the gallows. All this is a testimony to the freedom of his soul, as his sister Maria said of him. When we look at him, we see the absolute triumph of the soul over matter. It cannot be described. He should be compared to Assisi St. Francis and St. Teresa.”⁹⁵

This spiritual attitude was also manifested in one of János Esterházy’s most serious trials in Bory prison near Pilsen. President Antonín Zápotocký’s general amnesty, proclaimed on the tenth anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia, applied to all his fellow prisoners, except for Esterházy and one of his companions, who were turned back from the prison gates into the darkness of the cell. His partner attempted suicide on the same day. Maria noted with amazement that, despite all this, János was not particularly shaken by the incident, and – in retrospect – he was reconciled in his mind. He also found it amazing that his brother could cope with what had happened. He ended his letter to Luisa with the following words: “Until now, I have only loved him, but now I also respect him for his enormous spiritual strength.”⁹⁶

The testimony of his fellow prisoner, Rudolf Bošňák, former rector of the seminary in Nitra, is also a testimony to this inner freedom:

93 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 170.

94 From a letter written by János Esterházy to his relatives from the epidemic hospital in Bratislava, 24 May 1949 (manuscript).

95 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 106.

96 Ib.: 95.

“His behaviour was an example to us all. He was so balanced inside as if he were not in prison but somewhere at home. Inwardly, he was a free man, able to rise above all that surrounded him, and he owed this to his deep faith in God. [...] He radiated a wonderful spiritual balance. This means that he had an inner order in his life. He knew why he was suffering. [...] Esterházy bore his sufferings heroically, and he did not lose any of his human, spiritual bearing and dignity by having to spend years behind prison bars. His deep faith kept him in this inner poise and dignity. He was spiritually victorious.”⁹⁷

Rudolf Bošňák, who was János Esterházy’s prison companion for many years, mentions in his testimony that “Esterházy bore the sufferings heroically”. From Maria’s diary, it is known that he rejected the possibility of alleviating them by human trickery. At one of the most critical moments, when, after his return from the gulag, he was unexpectedly transported to prison, after his treatment at the Red Cross epidemic hospital was interrupted, Maria recorded in her diary the following incident: “Dr Virsik suggested that János simulate spitting blood, and then he would certainly be allowed back to the Red Cross.” Maria met her brother secretly during an X-ray examination when: “I feverishly whispered to him to simulate spitting blood, I also added a pin and a small (piňinko) coin that Ila-bila⁹⁸ had sent to him from Fatima. He accepted but said he would not fake it!”⁹⁹

One of his former prison companions, a priest (unfortunately, his name is not preserved in Maria’s diary), gave the following account in his correspondence: “He says that, although it is not proper for him to say so [because he is a Roman Catholic priest], he considers him a saint. He has no anger or hatred for anyone. He has forgiven everyone. He is serene and good, talks about everything, is interested in everything, and since this companion is a very educated (learned) man, he (has been) trained him in liturgy, canon law, etc. He states that there is no time to be bored. Their main occupation is prayer, they have a little room (i.e., cell - ed.) like a closet behind the wardrobe, and they spend hours there. ... He doesn’t rest after lunch, when it’s most quiet, and he prays then too.”¹⁰⁰

97 Ib.: 155.

98 Ilona Sajni was a former nanny of the Esterházy children.

99 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 64.

100 Op. cit.: Molnár: *Kegyelem*, 177.

János Esterházy, a servant of God, set an example of how he remained faithful to his principles in following Christ even when he had to pay the ultimate price, the sacrifice of his life, with years of suffering. He followed the footsteps of Christ, doing what his Master did and thus becoming more and more like him. Just as life sprang from the wounds of Jesus, so from the depths of the wounds of János Esterházy's suffering-broken life, God's life-giving power radiates out to us. Along with his fellow prisoners, Maria also confirms that after a personal encounter during a prison visit, "I felt as if I had been on a spiritual retreat... the incredible holiness that overflowed from him made him as attractive as never before".¹⁰¹

At their last meeting, his brother was essentially in agony. Suffering from a lacerated lung left him unable to eat, sleep, sit or speak. "I wanted to leave my rosary on the way out, but they wouldn't let me. And yet, despite everything, the only prayer that came to my mind at the time was the Magnificat!"

His martyrdom

János Esterházy's twelve years of imprisonment included a period of physical and mental suffering, which for him was equal to a slow death by torture. He received no professional medical treatment, and his request for hospital treatment, i.e., a temporary suspension of his prison sentence, was refused, even though his fellow prisoners' similar requests were heard on several occasions. Maria submitted her petitions and requests concerning her brother's case to various Czechoslovak state institutions (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, General Prosecutor's Office, President's Office, etc.). However, their fate was always decided by the party organs or the current rulers of the Ministry of Interior.

His requests for amnesty were rejected because his 're-education had not yet achieved its purpose.' The cruellest of the repeatedly rejected amnesty options was the general amnesty of 1955 when he was turned back from the gates with the humiliating and cynical ruling that, for him, amnesty meant a reduction of his sentence to twenty-five years in prison. He was, therefore, not subject to the release order. In a later letter, Maria, recalling this case, added: "One must be truly holy like him not to be broken".

101 *Ib.*: 51.

His cadastral tablet noted that he continued to 'cling to his old, fixed ideas', namely his Christian Catholic faith and belief in the triumph of justice. They treated him accordingly. Not only were the requested reliefs (hospitalisation, necessary medical care, suspension of sentence, amnesty) refused, but he could not even receive a single sweater to alleviate the suffering caused by his illness. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, can be done in this system, which considers that mercy is not a manifestation of compassion and that 'it can only be granted when the punishment has already fulfilled its (re)educative function' – this is literally what was written to me in response to one of my many requests (for mercy). God knows what He is doing – but it is horrible to think of how horribly He suffers in such circumstances".¹⁰²

János Esterházy, aware of all this, was prepared to accept the role of martyr, as also is indicated by the moments in his life when instead of the easier solution, he chose the more difficult path and, on several occasions, rejected the possibilities of leaving and escaping, and instead he took upon himself the cross of suffering that awaited him. However, did he ever think about speaking of his future destiny?

In his last letter, he asked to be taken to his homeland, to the hospital in Nitra, but, as if he knew that his plea would fall on deaf ears, he ended his letter as he had done before. "Forgive me for the complications, the expenses, and everything. I bless you, hug and kiss you all with all my heart. In your prayers, ask the Lord God to grant me the grace of a good death. God bless you. János Esterházy".¹⁰³

The Servant of God, János Esterházy, at the age of fifty-seven, in the dungeon of the political prisoners of Mirov, breathed his last in the arms of the blessed Greek Catholic Bishop Vasil' Hopko, who was imprisoned with him after twelve years of severe suffering in captivity. One of his prayers in the gulag was answered, according to which he should not die without the sacraments. His body was cremated in the Olmütz (Olomouc) crematorium. However, the warning "Nevydávat" (not to be released), which is still visible in the cremation book, cannot be justified by any medical or hygiene regulations.¹⁰⁴ This was the feeling of her sister Maria, who wrote to her sister Lujza after the funeral

102 Ib.: 104.

103 János Esterházy's letter to Maria (Mírov, 27 February 1957, manuscript).

104 Ib.

service in Velké Zálužie about the attitude of the authorities: “They punished the living man, but they could not forgive the dead”.

Epilogue

The example of János Esterházy, the servant of God, and of his fellow prisoners who suffered innocently with him in communist prisons, who, in the words of Solzhenitsyn, travelled in every circle of hell, should continue to have an impact on Europe that is atrophying in both faith and humanity. For this to happen, however, the message of their witnessing Christian lives must be made known to as many people as possible and should be included in school history textbooks. In the words of witness František Mikloško: “I am convinced that the death of the martyr János Esterházy has a redemptive power. Just as the death of Jesus on the cross brought salvation, just as the faith of Abraham brought blessing to the Jews, so the death of such a great man, who sacrificed himself for this cause, I am convinced that it has redemptive power”.¹⁰⁵

105 The interview with František Mikloško is featured in the Hungarian documentary entitled *Triptychon* (Budapest, 2021, Directed by Dezső Zsigmond).

“Lebanese cedars”

The role of Hungarian priests in the ecclesiastical and national unity in the Highlands under communism

László Tóth¹⁰⁶

“The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree. He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God” (Psalm 92:13-14).

Perhaps I have given an unusual title to some of my reflections on those Hungarian Catholic priests and pastors who, during nearly half a century of communist oppression, assumed the role of holding the nation and the Church together, and for this, they suffered the punishing iron hand of the regime. Therefore, although the title of my paper is ‘Cedars of Lebanon’, I will not focus on fields such as botany, ecology, and environmental protection. Still, allow me to say a few words about the Lebanese cedar.

The cedar tree is a dark, cracked-barked tree that grows up to 40 metres in height. Its trunk can reach a diameter of up to 2.5 metres. The tree is evergreen and grows rapidly. Its crown is dome-shaped to protect people sheltering underneath from the scorching sun. It can withstand the cold, even -28 degrees Celsius. Its wood remains fragrant for a long time and is resistant to woodworms, which is why it has been used to build ships. The biblical King Solomon also used it in the construction of Jerusalem – or as the Reformed pastor and famous preacher Endre Gyökössi calls it – the “great temple”. In Scripture, its long life and imposing form symbolise nobility, dignity, happiness, and strength. The tree lives up to 1000 years and is, therefore, a symbol of eternal life.

I want to talk about those Hungarian priests who can surely be compared to the cedar tree: they endured a lot from the communist regime, but the storm of the times could not break them because they had one goal: to preserve Hungarianism and Catholicism in Czechoslovakia. But let us go step by step:

106 Mons. László Tóth is a roman catholic theologian, canon and deputy archbishop.

From 1945 onwards, in what was then Czechoslovakia, especially in Slovakia, the multitude of believers and the Hungarian people suffered a lot. That year, Edvard Beneš issued decrees entitled 'On the Confiscation of Enemy Property and the Reconstruction of the Nation', ordering the confiscation of the property of German and Hungarian people. The Hungarian government verbally protested against this inhuman order. Karol Kmeťko, archbishop of Nitra, in a letter to the Slovak National Council, proposed an agreement against the planned expulsion of the Hungarian and German populations. He argued for the humane treatment and release of the interned Germans and Hungarians. Zoltán Hentz and Gyula Lipcsei, college students from Bratislava, on the advice of the Catholic chaplain László Paxy, set up a secret organisation to document the grievances of the Hungarian minority in order to inform Hungary and abroad. The organisation was composed mainly of Catholic intellectuals.

Meanwhile, in March 1946, the Czechoslovak Resettlement Committee began its activities. It propagated the idea of resettlement among Slovaks in Hungary for six weeks. Two hundred seventy-seven public meetings were held in 133 Hungarian settlements, thousands of posters were distributed, and more than half a million leaflets were issued. As a result, according to official reports, some 120,000 Slovaks in Hungary have registered, which means that 180,000 so-called "war criminals" could be resettled in Hungary.

Further restrictions followed in Nové Zámky: the District National Committee claimed that 80 per cent of the town's population was of Slovak nationality, and therefore banned the Hungarian-language Easter procession and limited the number of Hungarian-language services in churches.

The evacuation mainly affected the districts of Šamorín, Dunajská Streda, Komárno, Galanta, Šaľa, Hurbanovo, Štúrovo, Želiezovce, Levice, Šahy, Jesenské, Tornaľa, Moldava nad Bodvou, Kráľovský Chlmec, and Veľké Kapušany.

The Hungarian priest-activists contacted Prince Primate József Mindszenty, cardinal and archbishop of Hungary, and informed him about the situation of the Hungarians. Fathers Mihály Restály, Gyula Mészáros, Zoltán Krausz, István Varró and László Hajdú also visited the archpastor personally. It was the first serious step by Hungarian priests in the name of the Catholic Hungarians in Slovakia.

In June 1946, the so-called “recruitment of labour” for the Sudetenland began. However, there were hardly any volunteers. So, on Edvard Beneš's decree, the government resorted to coercive measures. The confiscation of the land property also began. One hundred eight thousand hectares of land were confiscated from the Hungarians.

At the time of the expulsion, the people in the villages of Gbelce, Mužla, Hamuliakovo and Kalinkovo were surrounded by the army. This marked the beginning of the forced deportation of the Hungarian population of Slovakia to the Czech Republic. The inhabitants of villages near the Hungarian border sought refuge in Hungary, which was a dangerous act because the army used weapons against the refugees.

In the meantime, Cardinal József Mindszenty appealed to church dignitaries abroad and in the West for help to stop the deportation of Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, asking mainly for the help of the cardinals of New York and London. The Hungarians in Czechoslovakia appealed to the Vatican, specifically to Pope Pius XII, for intervention.

In 1947, Bishop Pavol Jantusch of Trnava, on behalf of the Slovak Bishops' College, protested against the deportation of Hungarians to the Czech Republic to the President of the Republic and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He compared the whole affair to the deportation of Jews.

At their meeting in Komárno, the leaders of the Hungarian Catholics in Slovakia presented to the church leadership the demands of the Hungarian Catholics, including the possibility of teaching the faith and preaching in Hungarian and the possibility of Hungarian Catholic associations. Dr. Jozef Čárský, bishop of Košice, said that the parties had no right to interfere in the language of worship.

In 1956, Bishops Jozef Čárský of Košice, Eduard Nécsey of Nitra, Ambróz Lazík of Trnava, and Róbert Pobožný of Rožňava, constantly demanded that the government amend the church laws, referring to changes in Hungary. Meanwhile, Bishop Čárský wrote a separate letter demanding an end to the deportation of Hungarians in Slovakia during the unusually severe winter cold.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1947, the leaders of the Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran churches sent priests and pastors to the Czech Republic to provide spiritual care for deported Hungarians. These were Kálmán Tóth and Antal

Szabó of the Reformed, István Lehel Smíd and Gyula Mathaeides of the Evangelicals, and Károly Petheő, László Burián, the chaplain of the Catholics, István Cseri, the dean of Velký Meder, Imre Czigány, the chaplain of Kolárovo, Gyula Drozdy, the parish priest of Salka, and Damáz Fehér, a Benedictine teacher, Miksa Győri, parish priest of Kostolná Gala, Gyula Havasy, chaplain of Okoč, Károly Horváth, parish priest of Baka, Gyula Koller, chaplain of Nové Zámky, Lajos Lénár, parish priest of Melek, Gyula Mészáros, chaplain of Michal na Ostrove, József Molnár, parish priest of Dolný Štál, Valter Szepessy, Benedictine teacher, Béla Szócs, parish priest of Horný Bar, and Tivadar Vida, chaplain of the Bratislava Bishopric. They celebrated mass, preached, confessed, and prepared the faithful for Easter in several places in the Czech Republic.

At the same time, they also organised letter pastoral work, in which Gyula Havasy, Gyula Koller, Tivadar Vida, József Cséfalvay, parish priest of Kamenín and Father László Burián were particularly active. In Komárno, Lucián Bíró, a Benedictine teacher, tried to help the displaced Hungarians by printing press products. The pastoral correspondence between the priests who stayed at home and the deported Hungarians lasted for about a decade.

A special mention should be made of István Lestár, a parish priest in Komárno. After being sent home from Esztergom, seminarians from the Highlands spent some time in the Benedictine monastery in Komárno, where the rector was Monsignor Lestár, and the Benedictines were the teachers. In Komárno, the provost founded a Hungarian Catholic boys' boarding school called Mariánum. In 1949, he was arrested. They accused him of providing Archbishop József Mindszenty of Esztergom with information about the displaced Hungarians. He was sentenced to a labour camp, from which he was released ill in 1950, and then arrested again and detained in a priest internment camp in Močenok. After his release, he was parish priest of Olováry until his death, where he is still spoken of with great respect.

The priests who pastored among the Hungarian believers were arrested and sentenced one by one. Károly Lénárt received nineteen years, Mihály Restály six years, Gyula Mészáros five years, Frigyes Herczegh four years, and László Vizváry, a Reformed pastor, two years.

The Catholic bishops complained about the government's anti-religious decrees against the Church. During this time, the regime imprisoned anyone whom it considered dangerous.

In the meantime, Hungarian-language Reformed services were banned in Bratislava, against what the Hungarian Reformed and Lutheran churches protested. The pastors of both churches called on their parishes to continue holding services in Hungarian.

In Komárno, some priests demanded that the leaders of the Catholic Church in Slovakia continue faith instruction and preaching in Hungarian, to ensure the continued functioning of Hungarian Catholic associations and the training of priests in Hungarian, and to publish Catholic press in Hungarian. For this reason, in 1949, the Catholic Bishops sent a pastoral letter protesting the atrocities against the Hungarian population. But unfortunately, the authorities did everything they could to prevent the distribution of the pastoral letter.

During this period, mainly in Orava and Kysuce and later in the whole country, people demanded religious freedom in demonstrations. It is interesting to note that public opinion in Slovakia, political circles, Roman Catholics, and Hungary followed the events and the fate of the Hungarian believers closely.

In 1948, despite the ban, masses and sermons were again held in Hungarian-speaking churches, and due to the lack of Slovak-speaking parishioners, the prescribed Slovak hymns and sermons were slowly cancelled altogether. The parish priests were Sándor Poór in Veľký Biel, Béla Kurz in Veľká Mača, Lajos Ambruskó in Trstice, József Wilde in Kajal, Menyhért Czuczor in Košúty, Ödön Andrásfay in Váhovce, and János Kovács in Mostová. These and many others conducted the mass in Hungarian.

Following the policy of "small steps", László Burián, chaplain of Veľké Leváre, and Béla Szitás, chaplain of Borský Mikuláš, helped priests who had escaped from the internment camps to get to Austria, for which they were sentenced to two and a half years in prison. One of the ways László Burián helped an escaping priest was by giving him his own identity card.

Károly Lénár, the parish priest of Nenince, was arrested and sentenced to seventeen years in prison in 1952 but was released only in 1962 and only on parole.

Unfortunately, in the years of disenfranchisement and statelessness, many Hungarian priests in Slovakia gave in to the regime, for they considered

resistance pointless. They founded the Peace Priest Movement in Prague, headed by Hungarian Catholic priest István Zázeczky. Nevertheless, I would rather not talk about them, following the principle of “De mortuis nisi bene”. During this time, the work for the Hungarian people continued quietly. Tibor Montskó, the curate of Bešeňov, was approached by his parishioners with a request to organise a pilgrimage to the nearby church of Calvary in Dvory nad Žitavou. He answered that only men should come, at least 100 of them, and that smoking and drinking alcohol were forbidden during the pilgrimage. In the morning, the chaplain was informed that about twenty men had already gathered. Uncle Tibor – that’s what everyone called him – did not even go out but sent a message to those present: “I told you a hundred.” The number was growing. When the number reached 100, Uncle Tibor went to the men and took out the hymn book and the rosary, saying, “we can go”. They made the journey on foot, praying and singing, without food, drink or cigarettes. The parishioners in Dvory nad Žitavou were amazed as 100 Hungarian men were marched by.

István Bíróczi, the parish priest of Tomášikovo, spent a lot of time with the young people who were enthusiastic about him. He taught them to play the piano and organ so that some became cantors. During the harsh communist period, he revived the pilgrimage to the Lourdes cave in Tomášikovo, which was banned by the regime. At first, they came in tens; then, more and more people went to Tomášikovo to pray. Today, it is the only Hungarian shrine in the archdiocese of Trnava, which hundreds of pilgrims visit from the surrounding villages every year. In the meantime, he regularly requested sermons from the pastors, which he then secretly copied and delivered to the Hungarian priests. It was a great help to the young and the older fathers when no aids were available.

János Orosch, the present archbishop of Trnava, taught drama to children and set up a choir in Bušince, Okoč and then Vyškovce nad Ipľom. It allowed him to teach religious education in secret in the parish. He was dragged away for this, deprived of his salary for a year and a half, and physically abused, transferred from one parish to another. Of course, he was always assigned to the parish in the worst condition. Bishop Gyula Gábris of Trnava was able to help him by secretly giving him a whole year’s worth of his own money.

Despite not being able to sing himself, Zoltán Pintér, the parish priest of Dolný Štál, formed a choir of young people who not only sang at Masses but also worked with them in the parish. In addition, father Zoltán gave religious instruction despite the ban. He also brought together young Hungarian priests, who were happy to come to him for a full-day spiritual meeting every month.

After the fall of communism, Gyula Koller, a popular preacher and parish priest of Boldog, founded the Catholic weekly *Remény* (Hope). He served as editor-in-chief until the end of his life.

The persons listed above, and not mentioned above, can be safely said to be the Lebanese cedar trees to whom we owe the survival of Hungarian Catholicism in our small country.

The Persecution of Churches and their Martyrs

Géza Erdélyi¹⁰⁷

Focusing on the twentieth century, for the sake of understanding, let us ask the question: when and where did the oppression and persecution of Hungarian Reformed people begin? My present intention is to focus only on the present Reformed in the Highlands (Felvidék). However, the history of other Hungarian Reformed church bodies that have suffered a similar fate must also be described. Let us consider this an urgent task, for those who carry valuable information and those who survive(d) will soon and finally pass on to a different quality of existence.

Let us try to place the mournful era of the title within the framework of the universal history of the Hungarian Reformed Church and let us yield to the compelling force of the inescapable coherence and interconnection.

The persecution of our church began simultaneously with the persecution of the Felvidék-part of the nation with the proclamation of the Trianon Peace Dictate. To be more precise, at the end of the Second World War, the representatives of the victorious violence, the armies of the big-appetite, later successor states (they did not yet have armed armies), almost immediately crossed the borders of Historic Hungary according to their preconceived, drawn up arbitrary plans.

It is necessary to state in advance that the Roman and Greek Catholic Churches had a protector – the Vatican. For the Orthodox, too, there are prestigious church centres outside the borders. The Reformed had no such bulwark, for the Geneva organisation had no century-long history. They had to rely on their own resources. The conclusion drawn from experience had already been justified: only God and ourselves can help us.

The new state that had been created, Czechoslovakia, which called itself a democracy, began its church policy by quickly closing thirty-one of our Reformed church schools.

107 ThDr. Géza Erdélyi is a bishop emeritus of the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia.

The teachers at the closed schools lost their jobs indefinitely. On 1 September 1918, our schools numbered 276 and our teachers 378. The Reformed parishes smartly reacted to the measure: as they could not build new ones, at great sacrifice began to expand the school buildings by adding new classrooms. The number of parishes, including Transcarpathia, was 492. (It is a fact that Transcarpathia was annexed to Czechoslovakia, which was artificially created mainly for the interests of France's great power, as Transylvania was to Romania, and I could go on, among other things in order to keep the rest of Hungary isolated and at bay). The dismemberment of Historic Hungary and the giving away of two-thirds of its territory also made the young neighbouring countries enemies of the Hungarians. These vicious measures have not yet been resolved in a calming and just manner. There, the disenfranchisement, deportations, expulsions and hatred(s) that could easily be fanned today were born.

The persecution of the historic churches and the different ways in which they were persecuted

Even the first humiliating measure had an existential character and primarily affected those who wished to remain faithful to their national and religious identity. In our region, the two cannot be separated and have been shaped by historical processes with a validity that is still valid today. That is why the attempts to negotiate in isolation the anti-clerical Beneš decrees, passed against us but not approved by the actual great powers, were wrong. In order to avoid possible fruitless debates, I would like to highlight the consequences with an example. Let me now quote the Czechoslovak government's view of Reformedism in Lučenec and the Prague newspaper entitled *A+Z*, which operated under Beneš's political control. An article by the journalist Bohumil Müller appeared under the title "The Calvinist bastions of the Hungarians", in which he wrote the following: "The strongest bastion of the Hungarians in Slovakia is the Calvinist Church. It is a rich church. Just look at Lučenec, where there are about 500 Calvinist Hungarians, but these 500 have a priest and a chaplain, while the 3,000 Evangelicals also have a priest and a chaplain." This

hostile spirit was passed on and saturated with hatred in the years following the Second World War.

The newly established Office of the Commissioner for Education and Popular Culture was headed by Laco Novomeský, who, in October 1947, in a confidential submission, asked the Office of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs to check the implementation of the language change decree to see if everything was in order while highlighting the activities of the Reformed pastors. The commissioner believed that “the strongest obstacle to the Slovakisation of the South is the Hungarian language of worship and the clergy who keep it alive. Their sin is twofold. It prevents the churches from being overrun by Slavs, and it makes young people who have immigrated (i.e., resettled) from the north forget their mother tongue”.

One of the first actions began with constructing the HUKO ironworks near Košice. The authorities sent a “summons” to the clergymen, indicating the place and time when and where they should report for the brigade, digging the factory’s foundations with pickaxe and shovel. Accommodation would be in barracks, and daily rations were said to be provided. It was heard that it would last for two summer months, but the exact duration was not given. Very few people were prepared for the hard physical work and the burning sun. In addition, health problems arose, which they tried to solve locally. It was an ordeal bordering on inhumanity and completely unnecessary because the construction of the HUKO was postponed for years.

Structural differences between the historic churches

This is the next, almost neglected, but in my view, an important aspect of the study of the different ways in which oppression and persecution were carried out. Simplifying an otherwise complex set of issues, one can put it in such a way that the highest office of the Catholic Churches is abroad: the Vatican and the centres of Orthodoxy, except for the autocephalous – autonomous national churches: Romanian, Serbian, etc. From this point of view, persecution was taken on a personal character. The priests of the main leaders of the Catholic Churches (it should be noted that in the most populous Christian Church, the priest represents the bishop, the bishop the Pope) began to be attacked and persecuted. The aim was clear: to persecute the priests in order to bring about

the collapse of their ecclesiastical life. In contrast, the Protestant, in this case, the Reformed, the church and congregational communities were to be targeted, made impossible, conflicts between them stirred up, and the trust between pastors broken and eliminated so that the congregations and the community of pastors would be discouraged, isolated from each other, weakened, and closed. At the time of the most severe, inhumane persecution, no international church organisation, no governing body, and no authoritative defending body to stand up for the Reformed. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1948 Amsterdam) and the World Council of Churches in their present form did not yet exist in Geneva, were in the process of being formed, and were not yet functioning at a level that could effectively prevent persecution. On a human level, the Reformed were – are – defenceless and significantly outnumbered by Catholics. Looking at our situation, I would stress that parishes with a certain autonomy could be weakened more slowly, though strangled. However, almost 400 smaller to larger parishes could be martyred less so. This degree of parish autonomy was a positive thing. Reformed Christianity living the Word was no less resistant to the enemies of the Christian churches than Catholicism. However, the strength of the community, the ‘vitamin of the Word’, and the organisational structure and character of the church made the Reformed Church in the Highlands (Felvidék) more independent, more courageous, and less vulnerable to attack. But this fact did not exempt it from trials and suffering.

In the years of disenfranchisement, between 1945 and 1948, the pastors of the smaller Hungarian parishes struggled to make a living in abject poverty, doing day labour for little payment. In many places, members of the more affluent parishes tried to effectively alleviate the plight of their pastors, despite state prohibitions. There were also some, especially in the eastern dioceses, where they showed courage and supported their pastors in an exemplary way. There the saying of strong confidence was born: “as long as we have it, our pastor and his family will have enough to eat”.

The Reformed believers in North America, most of them Hungarian, sent aid packages home. Most packages were sent to Slovak congregations in their home countries, who also sold them on the market. At that time – until 1952 – there was no Hungarian nationality pastor in the leadership of our Church. (This is how we got winter clothing at the market in Michalovce, although

it was cheaper than others, for one of the Slovakian pastors, Juraj Kudroč, recognised my parents and gave them a discount, even a few children's coats. Many of our pastors lived in humiliation and deprivation. The 'business' leaked out and became a minor scandal, which the leadership of the time, led by Jan Tomašula, compensated for and tried to make up for by giving a one-off gift). In the early 1950s, a new chapter began in the life of our Church. The Synod of Levice legitimately elected a new Presidency, which corresponded to the national composition of our Church. Great changes were also taking place in the life of the country, which unfortunately increased our vulnerability in many respects. The farmers had been uprooted and become dependent. The authorities nationalised the property of parishes or, even more seriously, confiscated some of it – through the Beneš decrees. In nine cases, the parishes and churches were also confiscated, and only after the turnaround were recovered (“handed over”) with difficulty. The ideological repression became more and more severe, and the Hungarian Reformed congregations were plunged into a state of existential insecurity and even total disappearance; nevertheless, the grace of the Lord preserved our Church.

To prove that this is not an exaggeration and not a fabrication, I quote our former scholar-professor from Prague, who, by God's saving grace, is in good health and celebrating his 100th birthday this year¹⁰⁸: “For all other churches in the country, the end of the war brought freedom and hope for the future, but the Reformed Church faced the threat of disappearance. It was plunged into a state approaching genocide, justified by expulsions, disenfranchisement, and false accusations of collective guilt. Because of its Christian and national identity, it suffered constant oppression, humiliation, and the steady destruction of its personal and material assets in various forms and stages, and for almost half a century, it was reduced to a state of degraded existence. It is God's miracle that it survived at all!”¹⁰⁹

108 Lajos Csémy, retired professor of the Faculty of Evangelical Theology at Charles University, passed away on October 8, 2022, in the 99th year of his life.

109 Erdélyi, Géza: *A megtisztulás és megújulás útján*. Szlovákiai Református Keresztyén Egyház Kulturális és Közművelődési központja, 2019., 5–6.

Persecutions escalating to martyrdom

The most serious chapter of the following decades is the so-called “agent issue”. It was a great personal and psychological, spine-crunching, painful ordeal.

Before examining the methods of the state security forces in more detail, I feel it necessary to make the following points:

After the so-called list of agents was made public, it became necessary for the churches to take a stand. The leadership of the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia chose the path of a whirlwind in this delicate and repugnant matter. The law adopted by the Synod – Act 1/2006 on persons registered as collaborators of the Slovak State Security – was made public in the April issue of the *Kálvinista Szemle* (Calvinist Review), our official journal.

Before the law was passed, the Synod Council had issued an appeal to all those concerned, known and unknown, to sincerely repent and, consequently, to be forgiven. Unfortunately, it went unheeded. Both the opportunity offered and the subsequent law were and are a help to those affected. The Reformed Church is still the only one among the churches and religious communities in Slovakia that considers this serious issue closed.

The leadership of our Church does not want to judge – it is the Lord who judges – and the whole issue is also very complicated, for the cooperation has taken place at different levels. On the one hand, they used various methods of coercion and psychological pressure (mismanagement, management of the treasury, personal contacts with Westerners, moral compromises, blackmail, preventing the children of pastors from continuing their studies, the use of psychological terror, etc.), but, on the other hand, they also used various promises to win the candidates, who we now know are listed as candidates.

Most of the recruitments took place between 1980 and 1989, but the first that we know of – and this is surprising – was in 1959, and some in the mid-1970s, 1973, and 1975.

Regarding the content of the files, I feel it necessary to point out that there are indeed some erroneous entries in them, although one would think that everything in the State security line is a hundred per cent accurate. For example, in my dossier, there is an entry that I graduated from a Slovak grammar school in the town of Michalovce on the Ukrainian border. However, I graduated from a Hungarian grammar school in Komárno, 400 km to the West. Furthermore, there are inaccuracies in the spelling of names, incorrect

use of accents, lack of accents, etc. However, no one can claim that he is not the person in question, because, on one hand, his file contains a photograph, or clear traces of a report on a fellow pastor who was on an inglorious mission, or the material itself confirms his denied activities.

On the other hand, there are also cases in which someone has supposedly fulfilled a commission for which he has received a reward and the receipt for it remains in his file. As far as the size of the rewards is concerned, they are generally a function of performance, ranging from a hundred Czechoslovak Crowns (Korona) to several thousand crowns. In one case, to my knowledge, the reward was a servants' flat. As for the amount, in order to be realistic, it should be known that the average pastoral salary at the time was around the living wage – 1,100-1,200 Korona (crowns). In some cases, pastors should have focused on the inner voice and the Daily Word, not on the dubious means of gaining a foothold or perhaps securing a future for the children in this way. Again, from personal experience, openness and truthfulness was not something that the commissioners, and probably the liaison officers, could do much about. For example, they tried to impose a strict obligation of silence after every interview. But let us think about it: after each interrogation, it was possible to say that the family members had the right to know about the interrogation, that is to make a counter-claim.

In conclusion, I must at least partially give way to my emotions and say that what they did to us was disgusting, filthy and incredibly humiliating. I do not like to dwell on it, so much so that until your request, believe it or not, I have not even looked at my own dossier. I was led by the conviction that the Lord God had given me strength, that I had been preserved, that I had resisted, and that the State Security documents could not contain anything new about me. As for the part about who was watching me, I was not interested, and I confess that it would have been better not to know. However, I would like to draw the attention of my older pastors and fellow human beings to the simple fact that especially the young, who did not live through this, do not understand what I have told them and however painful it is, few of them care.¹¹⁰

110 Erdélyi, Géza: *Magyar sors Csehszlovákiában*. Magánkiadás, Rimaszombat. 2021. 84–85.

Through the Lens of Personal Faith: István Gaál's Personal Faith through Letters to his Firstborn Daughter

Zsolt Buza¹¹¹

Introduction

When one visits families, one would never imagine the hidden treasures in some lives and hearts. Yet, when one does some soul-seeking and asks about the spiritual legacy of a family, a lot comes to light. That is how I came to Erdelsky Ildikó (née Gaál), a pillar member of the Reformed parish of Bratislava, a child of a pastor. Letters have come to light that can serve as a testimony to all parent-child relationships. But first, let us examine the prospects that István Gaál started out with.

A short biography of István Gaál

István Gaál was born in Moldava nad Bodvou on 21 June 1908. From Moldava nad Bodvou he went to Košice and then to Lučenec, where a deep sense of vocation led him to a career as a pastor. Between 1926 and 1930, he was a student at the Theological Seminary in Lučenec, where he absorbed theoretical knowledge and practical experience.¹¹²

From 1930 to 1935, he spent his years in Košice as an assistant pastor. There the brethren were very pleased with his ministry. From the minutes of 12 May 1935, we learn the following: "The presbytery expresses its most grateful appreciation and thanks for the blessed work of István Gaál here, especially for the organisation of the Sunday school, for the enthusiastic leadership of the

111 Mgr. Zsolt Buza, PhD., a Reformed pastor and Church Historian, pastor of the Reformed Church of Bratislava.

112 Puntigán, József, *A Losonci Theológiai Szeminárium (1925–1939)*, 1st edition. Losonc, Plectrum, 2005, 161.

youth and the foundation of the Girls' Circle. Our affection and love remain with him despite the distance".¹¹³

He began his independent ministry in Čičarovce in 1935. In Veľké Kapušany, on 9 May 1939, he got engaged to Ilona Szekeres, a woman with Szekler roots, whom he married on 4 July 1939. God blessed their marriage with four children. Ildikó was born on 24 March 1940, István on 23 May 1941, János Gábor on 20 June 1943 and Erzsébet on 19 November 1948.¹¹⁴

István Gaál's ministry came to a major turning point when in 1951, he was approached by the presbytery of the Reformed parish of Bratislava to take on the pastoral care of the congregation. At that time, pastors serving under the communist regime needed state approval (contribution), which Imre Varga, who was then the newly elected universal rector of our church, arranged willingly, as he also supported István Gaál's arrival to Bratislava.

The family had just arrived in Bratislava amid the great changes, just to the extent that after the confirmation of their firstborn daughter, which took place on 30 May 1954, they had to pack their bags, as the interests of power demanded. On 2 August 1954, the Presbytery of the Reformed Parish of Bratislava, with Alajos Kovács, the senior pastor, at its head, expressed their heartfelt thanks to the pastor and his family for their service, which they described as "devoted, righteous, and exemplary."¹¹⁵ He was transferred from Bratislava to Košice.

István Gaál listed the spiritual services in his annual report in Košice on 3 February 1955. Every Sunday, there were two services in two languages. Children's services were held every Sunday from 9 a.m. for Hungarian children and from 10:30 p.m. for Slovak children. The pastor's helpers included Anna Stríčkóvá, Ilona Tóth, Borbála Császár, and Krisztina Gažík. The Hungarian

113 Minutes recorded on the meeting of the presbytery of the ref. church of Kassa held on 12 May 1935. In: *Presbiteri jegyzőkönyv 1927–1942*, Kassai Magyar Református Egyházközség Levéltára. [6 April 2016].

114 Buza, Zsolt, „Miután kiállták a próbát...”: *A Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség „Nagyjainak” története*. 1. kiadás. Rozsnyó, Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség, 2019, 98.

115 Minutes recorded on the meeting of the presbytery of the ref. church of Bratislava held on 2 August 1954. In: *A pozsonyi református keresztyén egyház presbyteri jegyzőkönyvei 1939-1966*. 234. [27 September 2022].

classes were attended by thirty-fourty children, the Slovak classes by eight-eleven.

After the Sunday service, there was a choir rehearsal, only attended by women. It was led by Etelka Kovácsné Béres. The mid-week service was held on Wednesday evening from 6 p.m., where the pastor taught new hymns from the hymnal book. There was Bible study and prayer time in the church hall every Thursday. Attendance ranged from eighteen to thirty-eight people; two Bible study members were hospital missionaries. On Saturday evening, there was a youth Bible study from 6 p.m. Examples from church history were lined up alongside the light of the Word. From six to thirteen, young girls usually gathered. Religious education was held in the church on Tuesdays and Fridays in a group, separately for the Hungarian and Slovak school children. Twenty-two children were enrolled in the faith classes. The pastor held Confirmation classes on Saturday afternoons from 3 to 5 p.m. Twenty-seven children registered for catechism classes. Adult confirmation training was also conducted, with five people enrolled. The pastor also did family visits, but not too often, experiencing that the spirit is ready, but the body is powerless. During the week of repentance, there was a service every day, and on Fridays, there was a service in Slovak. Christmas, Reformation and Confirmation celebrations were made more festive with recitations and choir performances. The pastor continued this practice until the end of his stay.¹¹⁶

His greatest heartache was when the congregation was forced to merge the congregations of Košice and Barca under pressure from the actual dean, a pastor from Barca. As a result, István Gaál was incapacitated in 1955, and after almost a year of sick leave and health spa in Sliáč's in June 1956, he said with living faith, "It is the work of God's hand to place us not where we want to be, but where we are most needed".¹¹⁷

Then, he left the church in Košice and moved rapidly to the community of Rožňava. He began his very valuable diaries on 22 May 1961, the Monday of

116 Report on the church building works in the ref. district church of Košice-Barca until 1 January 1955. In: A Kassai Ref. Egyház presbytériumának jegyzőkönyve 1952-1958-ig, Kassai Magyar Református Egyházközség Levéltára. [24 October 2016].

117 Buza, Zsolt, „Miután kiállták a próbát...”: A Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség „Nagyjainak” története. 1st edition. Rozsnyó, Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség, 2019. 100.

Pentecost, and finished the first by 25 July 1962. The first entry in the second diary was written on 21 September 1963, and the last was recorded on 27 May 1964. It contains his missionary work, which István Gaál described simply as “I went out to the church.” According to the records, in less than two years of ministry, he conducted 188 family visits, 62 hospital visits, 57 personal conversations, 27 Bible studies, 168 worship services, and 64 catechetical classes.¹¹⁸

Here, his caretaker and the state apparatus were abused in many cases. One had been parasitic, and the other had alienated young people from faith formation and catechism. Because of his high blood pressure, he took strong medication (Reserpine and Eryotoxin), which – as written in his letters of 11 June 1961 and 28 October 1963 – was purchased abroad by Bishop Imre Varga.¹¹⁹ For the last group of confirmands from Rožňava, the confirmation ceremony on 10 May 1964, when the pastor delivered his sermon, weeping and trembling, is still remembered today. His last high-profile sermon was preached on the 400th anniversary of the death of John Calvin on 27 May 1964 in the church of Rožňava, based on Pro 1:23, when he had a seizure while standing in the pulpit. The pastor was incapacitated from 29 December 1964 and moved with his family from Rožňava to Košice.¹²⁰

About letters in general

The family correspondence was initiated by the father, Nt. István Gaál. The sender’s address was already indicated next to the name: “Dukelských hrdinov 22 I. poschodie 8.” And the addressee was the beloved firstborn daughter,

118 Buza, Zsolt, Lelkész- és egyházüldözés a Felvidéken. in: Horkay Anna [szerk.], *Az igazság szabadokká tesz titeket! (Jn 8,32) Volt pataki diákok, lelkészek megpróbáltatásai az egyházellenes kommunista diktatúrákban kárpát-medencei kitekintéssel Emlékkonferencia 2016. november 18.* Sárospatak, Hernád Kiadó, 2017. p. 81–100.

119 Buza, Zsolt, „Miután kiállták a próbát...”: *A Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség „Nagyjainak” története.* 1st edition. Rozsnyó, Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség, 2019. 102.

120 Buza, Zsolt, Lelkész- és egyházüldözés a Felvidéken. in: Horkay Anna [szerk.], *Az igazság szabadokká tesz titeket! (Jn 8,32) Volt pataki diákok, lelkészek megpróbáltatásai az egyházellenes kommunista diktatúrákban kárpát-medencei kitekintéssel Emlékkonferencia 2016. november 18.* Sárospatak, Hernád Kiadó, 2017. p. 81–100.

Ildikó Gaál, who was working in Bratislava at the time and had a temporary residence with Mrs. Hasák at 14 Šmeralova.

The letters fall into three categories:

1. letters put away without envelopes or dates: 4 items
2. letters sorted chronologically by postmark: 5 items
3. letters with date stamps: 30 items

The letters were written immediately after his retirement until the summer of the pastor's death, from 1965 to 14 June 1967.

Content of letters

For better or for worse

The first letter came from Piešťany, near Bratislava, on 14 September 1965. It tells us that the parish in Rožňava had not yet been moved out and that the pastor would need six-eight weeks to recover. The best therapy for him was the mud baths he used, which helped his legs eighty per cent, and he could now button his shirt with his fingers. The grandmother engraved her motto on her child's heart, "To cheer the sorrowful". According to her daughter Ildikó, every weekend, she rented a room in Piešťany, visited her father, who read to her from the Bible, and burst into tears and held his hand.¹²¹

The next letter, dated 25 October 1965, arrived from Košice and further described the pastor's illness: neurologist Dudás ordered the pastor to undergo physical therapy and massage three times a week. His condition was finally diagnosed (decided) by the medical commission. In addition, moving out of the parish in Piešťany began. He described their current circumstances as follows. His description tells us: "The sick man feels himself useless. Day by day, he sees only his failure. Here we are comforted only by what God gives us, and we will surely receive it if we ask in faith. All I can say is that we can get through our difficult days if He teaches us, if He comforts us". Then comes the biggest question, which appears in several places in the letters: "How are you, dear Ildikó?"¹²²

121 From István Gaál's letter to his daughter (Piešťany, 14 September 1965), Ildikó Gaál [27 September 2022]

122 From István Gaál's letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 25 October 1965 [27 September 2022]

The retirement of the pastor

By the end of the year, on 15 December 1965, the pastor retired. The move-out also took place, where “Pisti (Ildikó Gaál’s brother) has worked a lot.”¹²³ When the pastor moved out, he got rid of his piano, which his colleague’s daughter, Katalin Samu, bought for Kčs 6,500. “We are trying to get used to the new and bear it with patience.”¹²⁴ The pension was paid, but not automatically. The pastor received his first pension advance payment in January, amounting to Kčs 1,550. Based on a letter from the pastor dated 8 February 1966, the employer was asked to provide proof of where and in what capacity he had served during the periods indicated: 01.01.1956.-31.10.1953. and 1.11.1953 – 31.12.1957. In a letter addressed to his daughter, he wrote the following as a certificate of service: “As an independent priest, from 1 April 1935 to 31 October 1951, I was in Čičarovce. From November 1951 to August 1954. From 1951 to 1954-1954, we were in Bratislava. From 15 August 1954 to 10 November 1960, in Košice. But you also know that from 1960 to 1965 in Rožňava.” He then added that his daughter could ask for advice from András Maťašík, a pastor in Bratislava, before asking the pension department at the state office.¹²⁵

In February, István Gaál still only received a pension advance of 750 Kčs, which was arranged by his daughter Ildikó Gaál. In his letter, the pastor thanked his daughter for her diligent efforts in this matter.¹²⁶

The size of the pension did not surprise the pastor: “We are not surprised by the pension. My pension will be the same as my medical leave. So, there’s no need to worry because it’s not for us, for the teaching of the Word is also true for us: ‘Don’t worry’. We are already practising this because there is not so little that is not enough, and there is not so much that is not consumed. One must limit one’s need.”¹²⁷

123 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 24 January 1966, 11 a.m. [27 September 2022]

124 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 24 January 1966, 11 a.m. [27 September 2022]

125 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 9 February 1966, in Kassan. [27 September 2022]

126 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 23 February 1965. [27 September 2022]

127 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 23 February 1965. [27 September 2022]

The pastor had to justify both pension advances, and the final decision on his pension arrived only after Easter: “A monthly pension of 820 Kčs and a family allowance of 120 Kčs has been established. It will be paid on the 6th of each month. So, this case is also closed. Now it’s up to us how we can adapt our lives to this. ‘He is right who believes and hopes.’ – I mean that for everything and everywhere. I want you to be faithful to this and that they always could read this from your whole being. It is always better to hope than to despair.”¹²⁸ Why the long delay? This Gordian knot was untangled by jr. István Gaál after he learned that all his father’s official documents were stored in the Church Department of the District National Office in Rožňava, and the official documents were not forwarded to Bratislava.¹²⁹

The work

The letters also share information about Ildikó Gaál’s work. For example, her father keeps track of where his daughter has served over the years. From January 1966, she was a transfusion nurse at the Mickiewicz Hospital in Bratislava with the leadership of Doc. Somogyi. During this service, her father encouraged his daughter: “You got a better job. You should be patient in your work, for this is a job that involves a great deal of responsibility. It’s great that you’re in a place you’ve always wanted to be. If you’re happy and content, so are we. For us parents, it is good to hear and know that you are living your days with peace of mind and confidence in your work after all your life experiences. What you are about to do is fulfilling the commandment of Jesus. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be called children of God”. I hope that you will do with a good heart what is expected of you by your fellow human beings who are suffering. Be ever sensitive to the encouragement of Jesus whenever you are afraid: “What fear have you, you little ones?” Let the star of faith guide you, my dear child. I write this to you not from habit but from a happy experience. Surely God is a certain help in affliction.”¹³⁰

128 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 18 April 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

129 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 20 March 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

130 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 24 January 1966, 11 a.m. [27 September 2022]

From 1 April 1966, after passing her examinations, Ildikó Gaál worked at the Department of Tuberculosis and Respiratory Diseases, where she was a member of the Institute for Postgraduate Training of Physicians and Pharmacists, based in Bratislava under Doc. E-MUDr. Karol Virsik, CSc. Her father viewed this new opportunity as follows: “If only you would be satisfied! Tomorrow you’ll also start your work in a new place. We hope you make a good exchange. It’ll be more stressful to travel to Podunajské Biskupice every day. But you’re still young, and life isn’t so monotonous! Be faithful and do your tasks faithfully: be industrious, diligent, hard-working, and do all your work in a good mood.”¹³¹

The celebrations of our lives

The moments of celebration were very important for him. He was happy when his daughter went to worship. In his letter, he praised the ministry of the pastor in Bratislava, teaching his daughter the greatest humility towards the preachers. “My colleague Maťašík is learning to preach as I did to the Slovak believers in Košice. Don’t look at what the church says but what he says. Everyone should preach the Word, which is always renewing, building, and new! Just exercise yourself in piety; believe me, you’ll be happier, more peaceful and content”.¹³²

And when his daughter served all Sunday, he supported her with these words: “You have served all day Sunday, work is worship, and if Sunday is free, keep Sunday holy”.¹³³

When he suffered from a chipped tooth, his father encouraged him to visit the dentist: “A well-mannered doctor, even if he is a dentist, will cheer you up and help you. Take advantage of the opportunities you’re given, and your life won’t be so monotonous and colourless now. Good company refreshes and rejuvenates”.¹³⁴

131 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 31 March 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

132 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 6 December 1965. [27 September 2022]

133 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 23 February 1965 [27 September 2022]

134 Letter from Rev. István Gaál to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 6 December 1965. [27 September 2022]

In December 1965, he called his child home to celebrate Christmas together: “Let us bathe our souls in the old and ever-new gospel and rejoice that God so loved this world that he gave his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, so that every man might have Christmas”.

The father did not forget his daughter’s birthday: “Dear Ildikó! Ildikó, it’s your daughter’s birthday. We’ll remember this day. May God grant that, when this day arrives, you may never forget the Lord God, who’s always graciously carried, guarded, nourished, and given peace of mind, both earthly and spiritual, to all men in his Son, who doesn’t look upon our weakness. May He be your guide, who is also your good shepherd and will surely comfort your soul with His holy blood”.¹³⁵

Holidays

The father also wrote to her about holiday options. In the summer of 1966, István Gaál’s family, who lived in Košice, went on holiday to the Reformed Holiday Centre in Tahi. He invited and expected his daughter to join him for a holiday: “...if you want to go on holiday in the Danube Bend, you can do so for 35 Forints at the pastoral resort of the Dunamelléki Diocese. I think you’ll have a good time. You’ll have the opportunity to swim and relax there. I’ve only provided one week for the whole family. That’s enough for our small pension. The address of the resort is Dunamelléki Reformed Pastoral Resort Tahi Lajos Madarász ref. deacon, Fót”.¹³⁶

However, Ildikó Gaál spent the whole summer in a hospital with nephrology problems and was treated for the first time with a drug from London called NEGRAM. During this period, the following reassurance came from home. “Don’t worry! It’s the greatest treasure, the surest foundation on which to build a life. You’ll help us when we hear from you that this faith will keep us alive, comfort us, encourage us, for if we’re united in this faith, we’ll be strong in the power of the Lord”.¹³⁷

135 Letter from Rev. István Gaál to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 20 March 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

136 Letter from Rev. István Gaál to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 22 June 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

137 Letter from Rev. István Gaál to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 22 June 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

Renovation

Discussing the apartment renovation in Košice, his father instructed his daughter: “The company wants to do it now: so, if we fail to do it, we’ll have to do it at our own expense. We have to learn how to lose too. That is the iron law of life. If we lose, we gain other than one thinks. The greatest Master is right who taught us this, his truth no one can mock, even if one often doesn’t believe it. I’m always looking for gain from loss. Masons have gone; now painters are serving us.”¹³⁸

Love

In his letters, there are interesting thoughts about love from István Gaál, when his daughter questions love: “I have already written to you, my daughter, about not talking about the past and turning our backs on past events. However much we may grieve over what hurts, we can only heal by not blaming anyone or fighting our grief ourselves. Ildikó, the proverb is true that ‘Love is blind.’ In this letter, I want to caress you and not hurt you. I feel that this is what you need most now. Boys aren’t as refined as girls. If you don’t have a determined mind, you’ll be blown away as soon as possible. Don’t see pessimistically. I feel for you because you’re like me. As I can’t live by myself, I need someone to talk to after work every day. Try to look at the boys’ minds and get into that too, don’t just be emotional.”¹³⁹

Delights with bitterness

When there was joy in the family, the father also put it on paper with bitterness: “Thank God, we are already over Pisti’s wedding. Pisti carried the financial burden in a tight circle. His parents were happy to accompany him on his journey. A very beautiful speech was given by Deacon Béla Varga. Everyone could feel that he spoke from the heart. Marika was also very touched. She came voluntarily to our church and gave a reverberation. I also asked for this great probation. The only thing that hurt was that you could not be here and rejoice with us. But what happens is no accident. Everything has a purpose.

138 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 28 July 1966 and 11 October 1966. [27 September 2022]

139 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 22 August 1966, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

Even your illness. He teaches because God is almighty! Learn from the events of your life. Be still of heart and at peace in the God of your life. You learned long ago from the catechism about the future: always be hopeful”.¹⁴⁰

While his daughter was lying in the in-patient ward with a new nephrology problem, Gaál heard the most wonderful story: “...once there was a sick son of János Koncsol, who was now a teacher. He lives in Bratislava. He was treated in Debrecen. Finally, the doctor gave up on him, but his father said: ‘Doctor, you are right according to science, but I believe my son will not die; my faith tells me so! The father was right. That’s what I say and tell you, my beloved daughter. Let this faith guide you. So, I think of you and pray for you every day’”.¹⁴¹ The father asked about everything concerning his daughter’s illness: “Do you have medicine? I’m getting it now through the bishop. A man despairs when he is ill. I’m often a man of moods. I’m getting on like that. It’s my illness. I moan a lot for no reason, and I fantasise when I’m in a mood, you know me well”.¹⁴²

His life philosophy

He gave his own vision of life to his daughter, based on a sermon heard on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and then reminded her of the weight of her choices: “The true wisdom of life: alas, we’ve learned at our own expense: my greatest enemy was the one who only praised me, and praised me to my face, blinded me, said only good things to me when I was a young man. But now I know that what I did wrong was a punishment. Be careful. You’re now fully independent, and you’re responsible for your own actions. You alone are responsible; now you can no longer refer as a mature child to Reus, whom I’ve been preparing all your life, now I confess with faith: it isn’t enough to bring a child into the world, but you must be able to set it on the path of life in such a way that it never accuses its parents as you did when you were at home. Now your happiness or unhappiness is up to you”.¹⁴³

140 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 5 December 1965. [27 September 2022]

141 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 5 December 1965. [27 September 2022]

142 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 30 May 1967, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

143 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 12 January 1967, in Košice. [27 September 2022]

After these weighty words, however, he did not forget the birthday greeting: “This small package should tell you that we, as parents, always think of you with love and every day we present your destiny to God, and we believe that this request will be heard”.¹⁴⁴ The last letters tell how pleased István Gaál was with the work of the deacon and Nt. József Vályi’s visit and was preparing for his medical treatment in Sliach.¹⁴⁵ From there, however, he arrived home half dead, and his condition deteriorated to such an extent that he died on 8 December 1967.¹⁴⁶

Closing words

A ruthless one-party system and smooth-talking church leaders had a common practice in our church life to move pastors. It was a cruel disciplinary tool when faithful pastors grew fond of their flock.¹⁴⁷ This was also a reality in the life of Nt. István Gaál. During the years of the communist dictatorship, he almost had to flee from Bratislava to Košice after three years of silence and from Košice to Rožňava after six years, almost in the Advent of 1960. Here, after repeated medical leaves, he was forced to retire.

But a pastor never retires. István Gaál’s congregation was his family until the last moment of his life. His letters to people far away testify to that. So, Rudolf Smahel was right; children from “good families” – by which he means Christian families – “who had lived in contact with their catechists during the totalitarian rule, had been given a good foundation”.¹⁴⁸ It is a father-

144 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, in Košice, 7 March 1967. [27 September 2022]

145 From István Gaál’s letter to his daughter, Ildikó Gaál, dated 24 April 1967, in Košice. [27 September 2022].

146 Buza, Zsolt, „Miután kiállták a próbát...”: A Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség „Nagyjainak” története. 1st edition. Rozsnyó, Rozsnyói Református Egyházközség, 2019. 104.

147 Benke, György, Megtorló ígéhirdetők ellen egyházunkban az 1950-es, 60-as években. in: Dr. Kováts Dániel [szerk.] *Tanulmányok Prof. Dr. Dr. Csobány János tiszteletére*. Sárospatak – Debrecen, Kazinczy Ferenc Társaság, 2009. 93-103.

148 Smahel, Rudolf, Pastorační činnost církve během totality. in: Józef Szymeczek – Miroslav Danyš [szerk.], *Křesťané v odporu proti komunistické diktatuře v Československu 1948-1989*. 1. vydání. Český Těšín, Slezská církev evangelická augsburského vyznání, Sborník materiálů z mezinárodního symposia uspořádaného ve dnech 3.-4.9.20204 v Českém Těšíně, 2006, 131–140.

daughter relationship, a relationship of faith. These letters form the basis of a true catechumenate. They are a continuation in written form of the already cancelled young adult Bible lessons that forced István Gaál to leave Bratislava. According to historian Ján Pešek's study of the so-called cleansing of the big cities – which in fact, degenerated into a purge, especially in Bratislava, where thirty per cent of the population was replaced between 1948 and 1952 (because of Plan A, Operation T-43, and Plan B) – it can be said that changes had taken place. Even at the church level, the desired people were in place.¹⁴⁹ It must be said that it was not the church that was a confessor, but the confessor who was a member of the church, even though every part of him was sick at the attitude he saw around him. After the frequent departures of Ildikó Erdelský's pastor-father, the air was cleared everywhere, but these surviving letters testify to the fact that whatever circles the disciple moved in in Bratislava (the Women's Movement, the Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Institute, or the ROH), he always knew that there was a stronger bond than earthly ideology, which his suffering father never condemned with a single word in front of his family and congregation.

The politics of totalitarian power seeks to shout through the void with slogans that sound like ultimate truths and builds on them, disguised by power and dictating certainty. This is a politics of denialist nihilism. The Holy Spirit is against it.¹⁵⁰

Yet, when the good father grabs his pen, he does not look to this but to the Father, who is the giver of all good. The good father communicates attitudes, interprets ethical solutions, and guides his child towards the thoughts of Jesus so that the sermon on the Mount may be the driving force in his life. His aim is to interpret the Mosaic Law through the lens of Jesus and to see, hear and speak as if through him, Christ is sending a message to this ungodly world.

149 Pešek, Ján, *Štátna moc a spoločnosť na Slovensku 1945–1948–1989*. Bratislava, Historický ústav SAV, 2013. 225–234.

150 Trojan, S. Jakub. *Moc víry a víra v moc*, 1. vydanie. Praha, OIKOYMENH, 1993. 69–71.

The Martyred Catholic Priests of the People's Alliance

László Bukovszky¹⁵¹

Introduction

The end of World War II brought the complete disenfranchisement of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The Czech/Slovak political representation envisioned reconstructed Czechoslovakia as a homogeneous nation-state, building on the revenge of the historical grievances suffered in 1938. At the same time, the Hungarians in the Highlands lost their citizenship, their general human and minority rights, their property confiscated, their institutions abolished, part of the population deported to the Czech Republic for forced labour, a significant part resettled in the motherland, and hundreds of thousands forced to change their nationality. In the rich historiography of the four years of suffering, the tragic consequences of collective guilt were presented, and here and there, the historical facts of individual and group resistance/resistance were also revealed.¹⁵² This was mainly limited to the tragic life of János Esterházy, his martyrdom, the extensive underground activities of young intellectuals organised around the Hungarian Democratic People's Alliance in Czechoslovakia and other illegal groups. Even if on a modest scale, peaceful individual and group forms of resistance to the chauvinist rule of the state existed. Their initiatives were partly directed towards the Czech/Slovak establishment and, having learned from their failure, towards the Hungarian government or, more recently, towards Archbishop József Mindszenty of

151 PhDr. László Bukovszky: Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for National Minorities.

152 Molnár, Imre: *Esterházy János élete és mártírhalála*. Méry Ratio, 2010.; Bukovszky, László: *A Csehszlovákiai Magyar Demokratikus Népi Szövetség és a Mindszenty-per szlovákiai recepciója*. Budapest – Somorja, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága – Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2016.; Tóth, László: „Hívebb emlékezésül...” *Csehszlovákiai magyar emlékiratok és egyéb dokumentumok a jogfosztottság éveiből 1945–1948*. Pozsony, Kalligram Kiadó, 1995.; Tóth, László: *Hontalanok. Dokumentumok a csehszlovákiai magyarság történetéhez 1945–1949*. Pozsony, Kalligram Könyvkiadó, 2013.

Esztergom. Their aim was to use their initiatives and proposals to try to alleviate the atrocities suffered by the Hungarians in the Highlands. This short paper tries to draw a parallel between their activities, their tragic fate and martyrdom in the context of the activities of the Hungarian Democratic People's Alliance of Czechoslovakia (hereafter People's Alliance) and the Catholic priests who organised themselves around Ferenc Bokor, former cantor teacher of the church in Kosihy nad Iplóm.

Who are the martyrs?

In order to build our thesis in parallel with the title of the paper, I must first clarify what is meant by the concept of martyrdom in relation to the topic and the criteria by which I define the possibility of identifying someone as a martyr in the context of the story. The term *martyr* itself has its basis primarily in religious history, in the history of the Church. In the strict sense, a Christian martyr is the one who has given or gives testimony to his faith by sacrificing his life, i.e., who is sentenced to death for having professed his faith or defended a virtue, or who dies in prison or, as a result of torture, and this testimony is recognised by the Church.¹⁵³ In a broader sense, the martyr is a believer who has been tortured, sentenced to hard labour or exiled for his faith.¹⁵⁴ The Hungarian Dictionary of the Interpretative Language gives a similar description. According to the authors, in a figurative sense, a martyr is a person who endures many hardships or sacrifices for the sake of someone or something, i.e., a self-sacrificing person.¹⁵⁵ These are also the main points on which I will base conclusions.

The People's Alliance and the Hungarian Catholic clergy

Between the spring of 1945 and 1949, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia suffered the Calvary of the general governmental measures and retaliations based on the governmental programme of Košice, which included the

153 Magyar Katolikus Lexikon, mártír – vértanú címszó <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/V/v%C3%A9rtan%C3%BA.html>

154 Ib.

155 *Magyar értelmező kéziszótár L-Zs.* Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2000. 891.

deportation of Hungarians from their homeland, the deportations to the Czech Republic, the implementation of forced Reslovakisation and the population exchange by the Hungarian minority without any voluntary action on their part.

After 1945, the established political power in Czechoslovakia guaranteed the free exercise of religion but was openly committed to a materialist worldview. It was very distrustful of the historic churches and had reservations about their role in society, their movable and immovable property, their extensive school network and, not least, their leaders and bishops. In a similar way to the Soviet sphere countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the shifting power towards communist ideology sought to repress and control the churches. In this process, the Catholic Church faced the greatest challenge as it was the most populous denomination in Czechoslovakia.¹⁵⁶

The situation of the Catholic Church in Slovakia was peculiar as its activities before 1945 were – in many cases rightly – equated with Tiso Slovakia. As a result, the predominantly Protestant Democratic Party, and especially the Communists, saw the Catholic Church as a brake on social progress. Moreover, the anti-clerical tendency in the south of the country was exacerbated by the (national) exclusion of the Hungarians in Slovakia, who were stuck with collective guilt.

Following the adoption of the government programme in Košice, the Slovak National Council also adopted a series of anti-clerical provisions in the spring of 1945. It nationalised the school system, which entailed the abolition of church schools and educational institutions, and then placed the provision of financial support for priests and pastors under state supervision. It even gave the state the right to withdraw the operating licence of priests at any time. This gave the state greater influence over priests and ministers than the ecclesiastical authorities had. At the same time, the authorities banned Catholic youth associations, took control of the St. Adalbert Society, and even did everything possible to prevent the publication of Catholic press products, which resulted in the temporary suspension of their publication. Because of his role in the Tiso puppet state, Bishop Ján Vojtaššák of the Diocese of Spiš and Auxiliary Bishop Michal Buzalka of Trnava were arrested in the spring of 1945 and

156 Hal'ko, Jozef: *Katolícka cirkev v prelomovom roku 1948*. In: *Február 1948 a Slovensko*. Ústav pamäti národa, Braislava, 2008, 613.

later released. The land reform that began in 1945 had a negative impact on the Catholic Church in several waves. For instance, many of its buildings and properties were confiscated and nationalised. As part of the land reform, the state confiscated more than 100,000 hectares of agricultural land belonging to the Catholic Church in Slovakia, which only increased its vulnerability to the authorities.¹⁵⁷ This was exacerbated in the Hungarian-inhabited southern parts of the country by the brief period of uncertainty in the area of church administration following the restoration of Czechoslovakia. In the spring of 1945, not only political representatives but also the bishops of the Catholic Church in Slovakia questioned the diocesan boundary changes made with the approval of the Holy See in the wake of the 1938 Vienna decision and called for the 1937 situation to be restored as soon as possible.¹⁵⁸

On the basis of the principle of collective guilt, the Hungarian Catholics in southern Slovakia lost their denominational school network, which had provided native-language education for decades, their social, charitable, cultural and religious associations, their clubs and their property, their newspaper publishing opportunities, and in many places even the holding of Hungarian-language church services. At the same time, dozens of priests and monks were expelled from their posts to the mainland, many of the remaining priests were transferred to Slovak-speaking areas in the northern part of the country, and later many were resettled in Hungary under the population exchange agreement.

It was no wonder, then, that the majority of Hungarian Catholic priests in a double bind were sympathetic to any initiative to find a solution to this unfortunate situation. As a result, from the spring of 1945 onwards, a series of illegal Hungarian organisations were set up in Slovakia, focusing on

157 Bukovszky, László: *A Mindszenty-per csehszlovákiai recepciója*. 185–186. In: *Célke-resztben*. Mindszenty József pere és a szovjet blokk főpásztorainak meghurcolása. Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2022.; Petranský, A. Ivan: *cirkevná politika na Slovensku v rokoch 1945–1948*. In: *Felekezetek, egyházpolitika, identitás Magyarországon és Szlovákiában 1945 után*. Budapest, 2008, 42–43.

158 Bukovszky, László: *A felvidéki katolikusok helyzete 1948–1949 között*. (Manuscript, 3., a paper presented at the conference *Hitélet és vallásos kultúra a Kárpát-medencében 11* held in Veszprémben on 21 August 2017).

protecting the rights of Hungarians.¹⁵⁹ The Hungarian Democratic People's Alliance of Czechoslovakia was the most organised and longest-lasting rights organisation. It was organised by László Paksy, a parish priest from Bratislava-Blumental, who has unfortunately been unfairly forgotten by posterity.¹⁶⁰ At the end of 1945, László A. Arany, a linguist and academician, became the first leader of the People's Alliance.¹⁶¹ Acting on behalf of the organisation, the People's Alliance was defined in 1946 as "the only self-defence organisation of the Hungarian minority in the Highlands (Felvidék) without party or denominational distinction". The People's Alliance tried to interpret the rights violations of the Hungarians to the Hungarian government and the leaders of the historical churches, especially to Archbishop József Mindszenty of Esztergom, and proposed solutions. More than a dozen Catholic priests of Hungarian nationality took part in the organisation or came into contact with it, taking no small risk. Most of them were members of the organisation's secret network. Their task was to assess the rights violations and their consequences for their parishes and the population and the Catholic Church. These were the basis for the organisation's memoranda and reports.

Sometime later, in the spring of 1947, a network of Catholic priests was set up by the cantor Ferenc Bokor of Kosihy nad Ipľom, independently of the People's Alliance but consisting exclusively of Catholic priests. Bokor prepared reports exclusively for Archbishop Mindszenty about the Hungarians in Slovakia and sent them through special channels or took them personally to Esztergom.

The Catholic priests of the People's Alliance and the Bokor group were members of the lower clergy in the church hierarchy. However, they were closely linked to Róbert Pobožný, the Vicar General of Rožňava, who became head of the bishopric after the death of Mihály Bubnics.¹⁶² Pobožný was

159 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 17 - 33., Tóth (2013): Op. cit. 550–556.

160 Dr. László Paksy (1911–1977) was a Catholic priest and spiritual leader of the Hungarian Catholic youth of the former crowned city during his service as bishop of Bratislava and later in Bratislava. In November 1945, he was transferred from Bratislava to Veľká Čalomija. In January 1947, he was arrested for patronising his followers, and after his release, he fled to Balassagyarmat, Hungary. He later became a canon and vice-rector of the Central Seminary. He died in a priest's home in Székesfehérvár.

161 Simon, Attila: *Arany Adalbert László élete és kora*. In: *Emlékkönyv Arany A. László tiszteletére*. Somorja – Šamorín, Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2007, 33–34.

162 Bali, Mária: *Ötven éve hunyt el Róbert Pobožný püspök*. In: *Remény*, 2022, XXXII.

tangentially involved in the work of the organisation mainly through László A. Arany, whose godfather he was. The underground work involved the older generation of priests, who tended to be more prudent and cautious, whose faith and responsibility for their flocks set an example to the younger priests. Their prudence can also be traced back to the fact that after 1945 some of them were brought before the People's Court on trumped-up charges of collaboration. Of the two groups of priests, the oldest was Pál Kovács (1883–1949), a canon of the parish of Hrkovce. The canon, a well-respected public member, was sued in 1946 on trumped-up charges at the People's Court for his 1938 salute to the Hungarian soldiers but was acquitted, and then in early 1947 for his Christmas sermon. Another manhunt was launched against him because of his pity for his supporters who had been deported to the Czech Republic.¹⁶³ Among the older generation of priests were also Kálmán Náday (1884–1956), parish priest of Iža, who was the director of the Marianum in Komárno between 1923–1926, István Hamvas (1892–1960), parish priest of Svätý Peter, Endre Hamvas, bishop of Csanád, brother of the archbishop of Kalocsa, Gábor Markwarth (1892– ?), parish priest of Šahy, Gyula Kovács (1897–1980), papal chamberlain, parish priest of Hrhov, who was the national director of the Catholic Youth Association of Slovakia (SzKIE) from 1932 to 1938, and from 1939 director of the office of Bishop Mihály Bubnics of Rožňava, Dr. István Lestár (1899–1973), c. provost, dean-parish priest of Komárno, former director of the Marianum Institute in Komárno, who was tried in 1947 by the People's Court, József Király (1897–1960), parish priest of Čičov, former member of the Parliament, who was persecuted by the Arrow Cross in the autumn of 1944 and last but not least Dr. B. Buznics, former member of the Parliament, and parish priest of Csicsó, who was arrested in the autumn of 1944 by the Arrow Cross. Dr. Sándor Bodor (1903–1973) was a parish priest of Biskupice, a former teacher at the seminary in Rožňava and, from 1938, the closest colleague of Bishop Mihály Bubnics, first bishop's clerk, then secretary.

Alongside priests with a wealth of life experience, the younger generation formed the progressive wing of the People's Alliance. All of them had already

Évf., 47. sz., 7.

163 Tipary, Ladislav – Lagová, Veronika: *Kňaz, ktorý mal rád svojich veriacich*. In: *Smrť za mrežami*. Prešov, Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2006, 67.

been socialised in Czechoslovakia. They had completed their studies at the seminary in Bratislava, Trnava or Rožňava. However, after the Vienna decision, some of them finished their studies at the central seminary in Esztergom due to the changed circumstances. Thus, it is not by chance that most of them were assigned to the relevant parishes as diocesan priests in Esztergom and faced the new situation of state power. Apart from the already mentioned Dr. László Paksy (1911–1977), one of the most agile members of the People's Alliance were Mihály Restály (1915–1987), a chaplain from Komárno, Gyula Mészáros (1918–1999), a chaplain from Michal na Ostrov, István Záreczky (1913–1995), a parish priest from Veľké Lehnice, János Csáji (1910–?), parish priest of Dubovec and the youngest, Gyula Koller (1921–2015), chaplain of Nové Zámky. These members of the younger generation not only provided data but also collected them and were in regular contact with the leaders of the People's Alliance and, according to the existing internal structure of the organisation, were its confidants.¹⁶⁴ Generally speaking, Hungarians in Slovakia formed closed communities in their homeland after the Second World War. This was also true from a denominational point of view. Responsibility for one another and a sense of vocation encouraged many Hungarian Catholic priests to enter into a community of destiny with their parishioners. After the violent deportations in the Czech Republic, many of them continued to stay in touch with their parishioners, and more than half a dozen Catholic priests, with the knowledge of the Church authorities, visited them in their forced settlements in the spring of 1947 and carried out pastoral activities among them for longer or shorter periods. Six of the Catholic priests involved in the activities of the People's Alliance took a fraternal commitment with their parishioners and, with the permission of the Church authorities, carried out pastoral activities among their parishioners deported to the Czech Republic in 1947.

The authorities were well aware of the importance of the Church's representatives in maintaining the community. The violent Reslovakisation and the Slovak-Hungarian population exchange across the country also posed new challenges to the Hungarian clergy. The dilemma was: should they, as stateless persons, succumb to spiritual terror and change their nationality, which might guarantee their retention in their original place of ministry, or should those

164 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 65–72.

who had received the so-called white sheet on resettlement in Hungary flee to the motherland or wait for the fact of resettlement? Clergymen close to the People's Alliance repeatedly sought the opinion of József Mindszenty on this issue. The archbishop's position was that he could not dictate to anyone how to act, but he stressed that some Hungarians in the Highland (Felvidék) remained in their homeland and would need Hungarian priests. The deportations in the Czech Republic did not personally affect Catholic priests of Hungarian nationality, but the Slovak-Hungarian population exchange agreement did. Some managed to escape forced resettlement. With the knowledge of the church authorities, they travelled to an unknown destination before the deadline for resettlement and returned only after the resettlement was completed. Many did not choose this option and left their parishes with their parishioners after being resettled in Hungary. However, many did not accept the humiliation and fled to Hungary.

Many of the priests involved in the activities of the People's Alliance met Mindszenty personally.¹⁶⁵ These encounters were partly planned and partly spontaneous, thanks to chance. In all cases, the aim was to obtain guidance and moral support for the situation from the country's prince primate and his office and to provide him with up-to-date information. Prior to the meeting of the leaders of the People's Alliance in Komárno in the spring of 1947, Mihály Restály travelled to Esztergom to report personally to Mindszenty on the situation of the Hungarians in the Highlands (Felvidék). The audience with the archbishop did not take place, but Restály had talks with András Zakar, the archbishop's secretary, and they discussed the future activities of the organisation. Restály outlined a comprehensive draft memorandum to the archbishop's secretary on Hungarian grievances. Zakar suggested trying to persuade as many Hungarian priests as possible in Slovakia to visit their parishioners in the Czech Republic and, in addition to pastoral work, to assess their situation and living conditions. The following year, at the end of May 1948, Mihály Restály met personally with József Mindszenty in Buda, where he reported the consequences of the closure of the denominational and monastic educational institutions. The archbishop asked Restály whether the Czechoslovak authorities had prevented the removal of the property of the

165 Bukovszky (2016): Op.cit. 125–135.; Janek, István: Mindszenty és a felvidéki magyarok (1945–1947). In: *Századok*, 2008, 142. évf. 1. sz., 153–181.

re-settlers, and how the officials of the Hungarian Resettlement Government Commission had carried out their duties during the resettlement process.

The next person to have the opportunity to meet Mindszenty in person was István Hamvas, parish priest of Szentpéter, who received his appointment as dean in Esztergom in May 1945 from János Drahos, the archbishop's deputy. In August 1947, Hamvas was in Esztergom on his way to visit his brother, Bishop Endre Hamvas of Szeged-Csanád, in Budapest. The five-day border crossing pass gave him the opportunity to visit his good friend Gyula Mátrai, the director of the archbishop's office, in Esztergom.¹⁶⁶ Hamvas was primarily interested in the future of his own destiny. He was one of the priests who received the notification of resettlement in Hungary from the Hungarian Proxy Office in Bratislava.¹⁶⁷

András Zakar was also present at the meeting with Mátrai, and he indicated that he would be welcomed by József Mindszenty, who was in the presence of Dr. István Lestár, the dean-parish priest of Komárno. Together, they reported to the archbishop on the persecution of Hungarians in Slovakia, the progress of the deportation from the Czech Republic and the population exchange that had begun. They also touched on the precarious situation of Hungarian priests. Mindszenty asked them both not to leave their posts voluntarily. In the context of the meeting, it is worth mentioning that Prelate István Lestár had visited Mindszenty on several occasions.

Among the priests belonging to the People's Alliance, István Záreczky, parish priest of Lehnice, was another one who visited the archbishop. Twice he was allowed to enter Hungary on official business. On both occasions, he stayed at the Primate's Palace in Esztergom. His first visit took place at the end of 1946.

166 At the beginning of July 1944, the Papal Chamberlain Gyula Mátrai was appointed by Archbishop Justinian Serédi as the director of the Office of the Prince Primate. See: https://library.hungaricana.hu/en/view/PazmanyHTK_Circulares_Esztergom_1944/?query=m%C3%A1trai%20gyula&pg=40&layout=s, accessed: 16 November 2022.

167 For the Office of the Delegated Authority, see: Fehér Csaba: Adalékok a dr. Wagner Ferenc által vezetett pozsonyi Magyar Meghatalmazotti Hivatal 1946 és 1948 közötti működéséhez, <https://docplayer.hu/155874264-Adalekok-a-dr-wagner-ferenc-altal-vezetett-pozsonyi-magyar-meghatalmazotti-hivatal-1946-es-1948-kozotti-mukodeséhez.html>, accessed: 17 November 2022.

Before his departure, he visited Pavel Macháček¹⁶⁸, with whom he discussed the fate of the Hungarian priests in Slovakia and conveyed the information he had received to the archbishop. In addition to the Catholic priests recruited into the People's Alliance, members of the Gömör group of the organisation, Ferenc Varró, Zoltán Krausz and László Hajdú, also met Archbishop Mindszenty. In addition to the priests mentioned above and the three young intellectuals from Gömör, several members of the organisation were in contact with Mindszenty indirectly through Dr. Károly Petheő. Petheő, who had been expelled from the parish of Senec by the Czechoslovak authorities in 1945, worked in the Office mentioned above of the Plenipotentiary in Bratislava. In addition to defending the interests of Hungarian priests in Slovakia, he was responsible for documenting the deportations in the Czech Republic.¹⁶⁹ Petheő, under diplomatic protection, was free to move around the country. In addition to visiting and reporting on the situation of Hungarians deported to the Czech Republic, he also sent Mindszenty several materials from the People's Alliance.¹⁷⁰ As for other members of the People's Alliance, Ferenc Bokor, a former cantor teacher from Kosihy nad Ipľom, also contacted Archbishop József Mindszenty. By coincidence, this contact was established in the spring of 1947. Bokor, involving seven Catholic priests, collected data on the grievances of the Hungarians, on the basis of which he prepared several reports for the archbishop and sent them to Esztergom.

The political police (ŠtB) already had relatively precise information about the activities of these individuals and their relationship with Mindszenty in the summer of 1948. However, the context built up based on the informers' reports did not suggest any organised background behind their activities.¹⁷¹ In the spring of 1948, after the Communist coup in Prague, the Czechoslovak

168 Pavol Macháček (1887–1969) was a Catholic priest, Slovak People's Party politician, a one-time vice-president of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London, and from 1946, the president of the Central Board of Church Estates. After the 1948 Communist coup, he was a leading figure in the Peace Priest movement, which served the regime. See: https://www.knihydominikani.sk/hlavna_schemhlatat_3?kpcmeno=machacekpavol, accessed 17 November 2022.

169 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 55–56.

170 Tóth (1995): Op. cit. 226–233. (Report by Károly Petheő, dated 14 January 1948 in Bratislava, on the situation of those deported to Bohemia and Moravia.)

171 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 154–157.

government took open action against the Catholic Church. Its aim was to get the bishops to recognise the people's democratic system and the party-state and to drive a wedge into the leadership of the Catholic Church.

The chronicle of suffering

The personal involvement of some members of the lower clergy and their relationship with the archbishop of Esztergom had already come to the attention of the state authorities in 1947. After Mindszenty's arrest and subsequent conviction, a manhunt was launched in the spring of 1949 against members of the People's Alliance and priests associated with Ferenc Bokor, former cantor teacher of Kosihy nad Ipl'om. In the first wave, thirty-nine people were arrested, detained, and interrogated in Bratislava within a month from February 1949. All of them were associated with the People's Alliance. The first group of Catholic priests was arrested on the night of 2 to 3 March. By 20 March, eighteen Catholic priests had been taken to the detention centre of the State Security headquarters in Bratislava. Their arrest caused great consternation and outrage not only among the believers but also among the Church authorities. In the case of the arrested and detained priests under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicariate of Trnava, the Vicar of Trnava Ambróz Lazík asked for an explanation of the mass arrests in a letter to the Commissioner for Internal Affairs Daniel Okáli on 8 March 1949. The police investigation, directed and conducted by the political police, was closed on 24 March 1949. The common accusation was that information classified as state secrets had been passed to József Mindszenty, who had been proven to be a Western spy and an enemy of popular democracy. Based on the indictment, the Bratislava Public Prosecutor's Office ordered a new interrogation. The prosecutor's indictment was completed by 20 May 1949, but the prosecutor in the case had "only" twenty-six people on trial. The main prosecutor, after three months of detention, acquitted four persons, among them three Catholic priests: the rector Dr. István Lestár, István Záreczky and Dr. Sándor Bodor. The oddity of the decision was that the first two priests had met József Mindszenty personally. The decision could have been a bargaining chip since, in addition to their personal contact with Mindszenty, they had the greatest authority of all the arrested priests, which could have opened

new possibilities in the relationship between the communist state and the Church. Lestár and Záréczy, of whom there is no substantial information, were sent to a two-year labour camp the day after their release. Záréczy was pardoned after a year, became national secretary of the peace movement, and was made a canon.¹⁷² Lestár served his sentence and refused to give in to the temptation of power. Instead, he retired and served as a priest in Olováry until his death.¹⁷³ Gyula Kovács, one of the arrested priests, was also released from pre-trial detention in mid-May 1949, but he was not released. He waited at home for his trial date. A similar fate befell the remaining fifteen Catholic priests. After five months in prison, they were all released on 23 July 1949 and allowed to return to their parishes. However, they were only allowed to leave with the permission of the court. None of the seven main defendants in the forthcoming trial was a Catholic priest.

Catholic priests of the People's Alliance

Name	Date of birth	Arrest Place and date of arrest	Further fate
Sándor Páczer	4 April 1917	Divín, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Gyula Kovács	27 February 1897	Hrhov, 3 March 1949	16 May 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Gyula Szécsi	30 August 1918	Číž, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Gyula Mészáros	24 June 1910	Michal na Ostrove, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – sentenced to five years
János Csáji	17 February 1902	Dubovec, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Mihály Restály	30 March 1915	Komárno, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – sentenced to six years

¹⁷² Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 209.

¹⁷³ See: <https://felvidek.ma/2015/04/temetojaras-xxii-az-ovari-temeto-sirjelei-lestar-istvan-prepost-nyughelye-es-a-tovabbi-papsirok/>; <https://adatbank.sk/lexikon/lestar-istvan/>, accessed 18 November 2022.

Antal Ádám	3 December 1915	Lučenc, 3 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
István Bálint	20 August 1912	Kameničná, 5 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
András Horony	28 April 1911	Nový Život, 5 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Imre Czigány	14 April 1917	Kolárovo, 5 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Ferenc Dombi	4 January 1915	Nová Stráž, 6 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Kálmán Náday	24 April 1884	Iža, 6 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Gyula Koller	1 April 1921	Zlaté Moravce, 5 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
István Záreczky	4 April 1913	Veľké Lehnice, 7 March 1949	20 May 1949 – acquitted 20 May 1949 – two-years labour camp
dr. István Lestár	17 August 1899	Komárno, 10 March 1949	20 May 1949 – acquitted 20 May 1949 – two-years labour camp
dr. Sándor Bodor	5 May 1903	Biskupice, 12 March 1949	20 May 1949 – acquitted ?
Gyula Harsányi	14 January 1918	Topoľčany, 20 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
István Hamvas	3 February 1892	Svätý Peter, 19 March 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted

In the second wave, members of the so-called Bokor group were arrested in early April 1949. Ferenc Bokor involved a total of seven Catholic priests in the data collection.¹⁷⁴

Within a week after Bokor's arrest, all but one of the priests involved were arrested. However, the case of Imre Zolczer, the parish priest of Šurice, was exceptional. On 5 April 1949, in the late hours of the evening, the police officers who had been called out did not dare to arrest him as the parish was

¹⁷⁴ Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 193.

surrounded by desperate locals, some of whom even entered the building to prevent the arrest and removal of their priest. Seeing the tense situation, members of the armed forces withdrew to Hajnáčka for reinforcements, and by the time they returned at dawn, Zolczer had fled across the border to Hungary.

Members of the so-called Bokor group

Name	Date of birth	Arrest Place and date of arrest	Further fate
Ferenc Bokor	12 May 1909	Kosiň nad Iplom, 31 March 1949	30 December 1949 – sentenced to five years, died on 17 May 1952 in Ilava prison.
ThDr. János Kissik	19 January 1910	Demandice, 5 April 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
ThDr. Gábor Markwarth	30 November 1892	Šahy, 6 April 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
ThDr. Antal Miksa Győry	14 January 1915	Kostolná Gala, 5 April 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Ferenc Hrabovszky	17 February 1902	Veľká Paka, 6 April 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
Pál Kovács	1 January 1883	Hrkovce, 6 April 1949	1 May 1949 – deceased in detention on remand
Dezső Balázsi	23 March 1895	Hokovce, 8 April 1949	23 July 1949 – released 30 December 1949 – acquitted
István Zolczer	?	Šurice, 5 April 1949 Unsuccessful attempt	6 April 1949 – fled to Hungary

Together with the priests of the Bokor group, a total of twenty-four Catholic priests and one layman were arrested and held in pre-trial detention on church lines. The two groups carried out their legal work independently and were unaware of each other. According to the indictments, both groups prepared information and reports for Mindszenty about Hungarians in Slovakia, the contents of which were classified by the main prosecutor as secret data in the interest of the state. The abducted priests were subjected to brutal interrogations during their pre-trial detention, which was not free from physical abuse and human humiliation. The brutal methods used in the pre-trial arrests resulted in the death of Canon Pál Kovács, a member of the Bokor group, who died on 1 May 1949 at the age of sixty-six.¹⁷⁵ The indictment against the members of the Bokor group was completed on 18 May 1949 and included Bokor and five Catholic priests among the accused. Apart from Ferenc Bokor, the others were released on 23 July 1949 after four months' imprisonment. They were allowed to leave the detention centre of the district court and await trial at home.

The consolidated trial of the members of the two groups before the Bratislava State Court began on 28 December 1949. Among the thirty-two defendants, twenty Catholic priests were on the bench. The trial lasted three days, and the verdict, delivered on 30 December 1949, sentenced ten of the accused to a total of fifty-five years in prison as the main penalty. Among the convicted were two Catholic priests, Mihály Restály (six years), Gyula Mészáros (five years) and cantor teacher Ferenc Bokor, who received five years in prison. The other Catholic priests, eighteen in number, were acquitted by the court. The convicts served their sentences in the harshest and most inhuman prisons and labour camps of Stalinist Czechoslovakia, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, respectively. There, Ferenc Bokor died tragically shortly after his forty-second birthday on 17 May 1952.¹⁷⁶

In the context of the conceptual procedure and the trial, there were obviously two parallel lines of confrontation: church politics and minority issues. The primary goal of the Communist power was to use the machinery to incorporate the Mindszenty cliché invented by Rákosi – the enemy of people's

175 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 187.

176 Bukovszky (2016): Op. cit. 202; Petranský, A. Ivan: František Bokor. In: *Smrt' za mrežami*. Prešov, Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2006, 300.

democracy, Western spy, etc. – into the criminal prosecution and the verdict, and thus to intimidate the leading representatives of the Catholic Church. A further goal was to put pressure on them in order to recognise the one-party communist dictatorship that was being established. In the indictment and later in the trial transcript, the emphasis on the protection of minority rights was almost neglected and, in fact, was not even mentioned in any precise way. The logic behind this was that the CCP Central Committee had already submitted its proposal on the settlement of the situation of Hungarian workers to the government on 19 July 1948. Moreover, in October, a law was passed on recognising Hungarian citizenship and providing education in the mother tongue for Hungarian children of compulsory school age, followed by a provision on the admission of Hungarians to the Communist Party. On 15 December 1948 the weekly newspaper Új Szó was published as the weekly newspaper of Hungarian workers. The process of forming the Cultural Association of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia (CsEMADOK) began when the first suspects of the People's Alliance were arrested.¹⁷⁷ Based on the facts above, the authorities did not want to create minority, rights-defending heroes out of the accused since they already had their own party soldiers to implement the human and minority rights granted on the basis of party proposals. Furthermore, the defendants and the accusers were fully aware that the activities of the members of the two 'organisations' were aimed only at improving the legal situation of Hungarians in the Highlands. Therefore, the intimidation of the accused was directed not only at the Catholic Church but also at the Hungarian believers and the entire community.

Epilogue

Based on the tragic history and the knowledge of the Mindszenty trial in Slovakia, one can clearly formulate the answer to the question raised, according to the aspects outlined at the beginning of this paper: were the Catholic priests from the Highlands (Felvidék) accused in the trial martyrs? In answering this question, it is clear that the more than two dozen Catholic priests who were

¹⁷⁷ Popély, Árpád: *A (cseh)szlovákiai magyarság történeti kronológiája 1944–1992*. Somorja, Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2006, 148–163.

persecuted in the course of the trial (as well as the other suspects) were victims of the anti-clerical policies of the emerging Bolshevik regime.

If the two aspects outlined in the introduction are taken into account in defining martyrdom, the fate of those arrested during the trial, those who were detained and killed during several months of pre-trial detention, those who were convicted during the trial and those who died during their imprisonment, can clearly be related to the above aspects – whether the narrow or the broader interpretation is taken into account. For example, Canon Paul Kovács was deported for his faith and martyred because of his brutal treatment in custody. The same was true of Ferenc Bokor, who was also deported, held on remand for nine months, and sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but was detained despite his recurring illness and died in terrible agony at the age of forty-three. The personal fate and story of these two men are one of martyrdom.

The other priests involved in the persecution and the trial can also be described as martyrs in the broader sense of the definition, on the basis of their fate and their perseverance. With few exceptions, five priests of the People's Alliance and the Bokor group were subjected to cruel detention on remand for five and four months, respectively. Almost all of them were eventually acquitted of the charges, but the trial and the authorities' intimidation left a lifelong mark on several of them. However, in order to set an example to the representatives of the Church, the Communist authorities sentenced two of the most agile representatives of the young generation of priests, Mihály Restály and Gyula Mészáros, to six and five years in prison, respectively. Both were imprisoned in Leopoldov, in the Handlova labour camp and then in the uranium mines of Jáchymov. They were released in the summer of 1953 and 1954.

However, it is necessary to point out that the persons involved in the Mindszenty trial in Slovakia were kept at bay by the communist regime after their acquittal and release. It is for this reason that the martyrdom of some of them is called into question by their later actions, after they had succumbed to the pressure/blackmail/personal ambitions of the communist regime, at the cost of their inner weakness, in fact turning against their moral conduct in the past and not least against the dogmas of the Church.

Murders of priests in Hungary between 1945 and 1957

Viktor Attila Soós¹⁷⁸

Introduction

There is a library of literature on the persecution and hardships of the historic churches in the twentieth century, the anti-church attitude of the National Socialist and Communist dictatorships, the restrictive measures implemented in the Carpathian Basin, and the events of persecution of the church. Numerous researchers have dealt with the victims, those who lost their lives, those who were sentenced to death and executed, those who died an unnatural death, those who were murdered, those who were deprived of their freedom, those who were deported, interned, placed under house arrest, convicted, and imprisoned. One of the enemies of the communist dictatorship, and perhaps the most important to be destroyed, were the churches and their priests, pastors, and adherents. They sought to use the harshest means and the cruellest methods against those who played an active role in their communities.

In the present study, I will examine the lives of priests and pastors of the historic churches murdered in Hungary during the communist dictatorship.¹⁷⁹ One of the specific means of intimidation, harassment and terror was the physical destruction of the opponent. Violence, brutality, and terror became part of

178 Dr. Viktor Attila Soós, PhD. is a historian and member of the Committee of National Remembrance, Budapest.

179 Dr. Szántó, Konrád OFM: *A meggyilkolt katolikus papok kálváriája*. Budapest, Mécses Kiadó, 1991.; Mészáros, István: *Ismeretlen vértanúk az Esztergom-Budapesti Főegyházmegye XX. századi történetében*. Budapest, 2000.; Fejérdy, András: A vértanúk évszázada Magyarországon. A XX. század magyar mártírjainak főbb típusai. In: *Ars longa vita brevis. A hetvenéves Rokay Zoltán köszöntése*. Ed.: Vincze Krisztián. Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2017. 40–56.; Szabó, Csaba: Katolikus papok mártírjuma a forradalom után. In: *Halálra ítélve – papi sorsok '56 után*. Eds.: Bellavics István, Földváryné Kiss Réka. Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága – Országház Könyvkiadó, 2018. 92–100.; Tóth, Tamás: A Magyarországi kommunizmus áldozatai 1945 és 1989 között. In: *Hungaria Rómából. Tanulmányok az új- és jelenkori magyar egyháztörténelemből*. Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2021. 267–280.

everyday life in the twentieth century. The fate of churchmen beaten to death, executed, imprisoned, persecuted, and made impossible during communist dictatorships is a testimony of adherence to the faith.

From the very beginning, the theoreticians and practitioners of communism were hostile to Christian churches, religion, and faith in the deeper and more sublime meaning of life in general. Initially, they attacked the churches in their writings, and after they came to power, they persecuted them with violence, sometimes openly and sometimes covertly. In 1905, twelve years before coming to power, Lenin, the founder of the Communist dictatorship in Russia, wrote in his article entitled "Socialism and Religion" that religion should be a 'private matter' but not 'a private matter for the Communist Party'. This approach was typical of the two-faced nature of the communists, who had a single driving force behind them: the desire for power. At the same time, they could not tolerate the 'reality of things hoped for' since they wanted to eliminate the role of faith, that is, the conviction in the meaning of human existence beyond itself.

First, it is worth clarifying what is meant by priest murder and who can be considered victims of priest murder. I will then examine, by period and era, the clerics who were murdered for their faith and their attachment to the Church. Finally, in my study, I will introduce the murders of pastors and priests of the (historic) Christian churches: the Evangelical, the Catholic (Greek and Roman), and the Reformed Churches.

What is considered a priest murder?

The Csemegi Code, which entered into force with Act no. V of 1878 provided: "In the field of homicide, it distinguished between intentional and negligent homicide and further subdivided them into subcategories. Murder was defined as homicide committed with premeditation and homicide committed in a state of strong impulse." Since the general part remained in force until 1951 and the specific part until 1962, it was the applicable law in our era.

By 'clergy murder', I mean the assault on an ordained person, the violent taking of the life of a clergyman exercising his ministry or a minister in a church office. This act can be considered intentional, premeditated, or a crime of impulsive homicide. In the period of the Communist dictatorship, it is important to

stress that in many cases, the perpetrator was not identified, the authorities did not carry out their investigation properly, or it was an alleged perpetrator who was framed for the murder.

It is not the deaths of the communist dictatorship that are considered in this study in relation to pastors, but specifically those who were murdered.¹⁸⁰

By talking about the murders of a clergyman, one cannot ignore the fact that the perpetrators may have been motivated by loyalty to the party-state, orders, intimidation, or antipathy towards the church. In many cases, intimidation and deterrence were behind the acts committed.

Rather than lone perpetrators, in most cases, several people carried out the cruel act. In more than one case, brutal acts were committed by persons in uniform. The dramatic thing about these murders of priests is that, in addition to the motive against faith, the aim of those in power was intimidation, deterrence and setting an example.

Church victims at the end of World War II

Church victims in the Southern Land (Délvidék)

In the last years of the Second World War, in the Carpathian Basin, it was mainly in the South that churches were victims of atrocities committed by the local military authorities. Between October 1944 and 27 January 1945, a military administration was in place, and tens of thousands of civilians of Hungarian, German and Croatian nationality were slaughtered.¹⁸¹ Among the victims of the partisans were clerics. More than forty Catholic priests, as well as Reformed and Lutheran pastors, are known from the research of Károly Hetényi Varga, Márton Matuska, Tamás Tóth, and others.¹⁸² Most

180 In my study, I present the victims of the historic churches in chronological order of the time of their death.

181 Cseres, Tibor: *Vérbosszú a Bácskában*. Budapest 1991.; Matuska, Márton: *A megtorlás napjai. Ahogy az emlékezet megőrizte*. Novi Sad 1991.; *Magyar tragédia, Délvidék 1944-1945*. <http://www.delvidekitragedia.hu/>; *Keskenyúton, Délvidéki tragédiánk 1944-45*. <http://www.delvidekitragedia.hu/>

182 Hetényi Varga, Károly: *Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában*. 2. Abaliget 1994.; Cirkl, Zsuzsa – Fuderer, László: *Bácskai golgota. A vallásüldözés áldozatai*. Tóthfalu 1998.; Matuska, Márton: *Az elhallgatott razzia. Vérengzés Újvidéken (1944-45)*. Keskenyúton Délvidéki Tragédiánk 1944-45 Alapítvány, Budapest,

of the Roman Catholic priests in Bácska belonged to the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Kalocsa-Bács, who urged his priests to remain with their parishioners.¹⁸³ Alongside them, Roman Catholic priests from the part of the Csanád diocese that had been annexed to Yugoslavia, the Apostolic Governorate of Nagybecskerek (Општина Зрењанин – Opština Zrenjanin), the part of the Pécs diocese that had been annexed to Yugoslavia, and the Apostolic Governorates of North Szerém and South Baranya were massacred. Monks, such as Franciscans Kristóf Kovács and Krizosztom Köröszts, as well as Greek Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran pastors, were also victims. According to current research, the following church victims are known to have been murdered in the Southern Land:

Antal Berger, Roman Catholic parish priest, Tavankut;
Ferenc Brunet, Roman Catholic parish priest, Нова Црња / Nova Crnja;
Antal Dobler, Roman Catholic parish priest of Гаково / Gakovo;
Bálint Dupp, Roman Catholic parish priest, Чуруг / Čurug;
Ferenc Faragó, reformed deacon, Kneževi Vinogradi;
Géza Friedrich, Roman Catholic parish priest, Branjin Vrh;
Bishop János Gachal, reformed bishop, Дебелџача / Debeljača;
Pál Gencel, Roman Catholic chaplain, Ириг / Irig;
Károly Gulyás, Roman parish priest, Будисава / Budisava;
Antal Haug, Roman Catholic administrator of Чонопља / Čonoplja;
Dr. Imre Hettesheimer, Reformed church administrator, Сомбор / Sombor;
Tivadar Klein, Roman Catholic parish priest, Beli Manastir;
Sándor Koppány (Kosztolányi), Reformed pastor of Сомбор / Sombor;
Gáspár Kopping, Roman Catholic parish priest, Темерин / Temerin;
Jakab Kopping, Roman Catholic parish priest, Станишић / Станишић;
Kristóf Kovács, Franciscan monk, Нови Сад / Novi Sad;
Krizostom Köröszts, Franciscan monk, head of the monastery in Нови Сад / Novi Sad;

2015.; *Délvidéki Magyar Golgota 1944–45. Kiállítási katalógus*. Eds.: Bank, Barbara – Cseresyésné Kiss, Magdolna, Budapest; Tóth, Tamás: A Kalocsa-Bácsi főegyházmege mártír papjai 1944–1945-ben. In: *Hungaria Rómából. Tanulmányok az új- és jelenkori magyar egyháztörténelemből*. Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2021. 219–244.

183 Tóth, Tamás: A Kalocsa-Bácsi főegyházmege mártír papjai 1944–1945-ben. In: *Hungaria Rómából. Tanulmányok az új- és jelenkori magyar egyháztörténelemből*. Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 2021. 225.

István Köves, Roman Catholic parish priest Мошорин / Mošorin;
 István Müller-Mészáros, Roman Catholic parish priest, Бачка Паланка /
 Bačka Palanka;
 Péter Müller, Roman Catholic parish priest of Бачки Грачац / Bački Gračac;
 József Novotny, Roman Catholic parish priest, Плавна / Plavna;
 Ferenc, Petrányi, Roman Catholic parish priest, ОПШТИНА Бечеј / Opština
 Bečej;
 Plank Ferenc, Roman Catholic parish priest of СИВАЦ / Sivas;
 Lőrinc Scherer, Roman Catholic deputy parish priest of Црвенка / Crvenka;
 József Schmidt, Roman Catholic pastor, Dubrovnik;
 Jakab Schön, Roman Catholic theology student, Бачка Паланка / Bačka
 Palanka;
 Dénes Szabó, Roman Catholic parish priest, ТОТОВО СЕЛО / Totovo Selo;
 Dr. Ferenc Takács, Papal Chamberlain, Member of Parliament, Roman
 Catholic parish priest of Бачко Петрово Село / Bačko Petrovo Selo;
 Károly Thomka, Reformed deacon of Војловица / Vojlovica;
 Károly Unterreiner, Papal Chaplain, Roman Catholic pastor, Бачка Паланка
 / Bačka Palanka;
 Endre Varga, Roman Catholic parish priest of Тоба / Toba;
 Lajos Varga, Roman Catholic parish priest of Мол / Mol;
 István Virág, Roman Catholic abbot-priest of Хоргош / Horgoš;
 Michael Weidner, Capuchin monk from Switzerland. He was taken from
 Novi Sad with the Franciscans and killed.
 Peter Weinert, Prepost, Roman Catholic parish priest of Бачка Паланка /
 Bačka Palanka;
 Mihály Werner, Roman Catholic parish priest of Мартонош / Martonoš.

They suffered abuse but were not murdered:

Gáspár Kopping, Roman Catholic parish priest of Temerin, survived the Járek
 internment camp but succumbed to injuries sustained during the abuse.

Alfréd Lányi, Lutheran pastor in Kucura. He died in the Járek death camp on
 19 June 1945.

I would like to present some life paths in a little more detail.

János Gachal was born in Poroszló on 29 June 1881. He went to elementary school in Poroszló, then to the Reformed College in Debrecen. Between 1903 and 1905, he was a religious teacher and assistant pastor of the Reformed congregation in Németh, and between 1905 and 1908 he was an assistant pastor of the congregation in Szatmár. In 1908, the general assembly of the Mikola Reformed Congregation elected him a regular pastor, where he served for two and a half years. After that, he moved to the South. From 1910, he was the pastor of the congregation of Панчево / Pančevo for twelve years. In 1919, he became vice-dean of the Reformed Diocese of Banat and later dean of the diocese. After Trianon, his father-in-law refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new South Slav state and was expelled from the country. Gachal, yielding to the call of the long-established Дебелџача / Debeljača congregation, which had been left without a pastor, and having turned down a secure position in Hungary – that of secretary of the Reformed convention – succeeded his father-in-law. He became the spiritual and intellectual leader of the Hungarians of southern Banat.

The Hungarian invasion of southern Hungary in 1941 did not affect the Yugoslav territories of western Banat, which the Germans occupied. The Hungarian Reformed congregations there left without a bishop, elected János Gachal as their new bishop in December 1942. At this time, he rescued Jews who were being persecuted and looked after the family of Péter Németh, the imprisoned Communist Party secretary of the village. Soviet troops reached the Yugoslav-Romanian border in the Banat region on 1 October 1944. Tito gave a free hand to his partisans, who took revenge on the Hungarians for the victims of the 1942 massacre in Novi Sad. Gachal had been warned by several of his acquaintances to hide or flee, but he felt obliged to stand by his supporters in these difficult times. On 18 October 1944, he was summoned to the village hall, beaten to death, and buried in the trench of the Western Cemetery on the same night. For many decades, even the mention of the martyred bishop's name was forbidden, but his followers preserved the memory of their faithful pastor.¹⁸⁴

184 Matuska, Márton: *Megvert pásztorunk. Adalékok Gachal János torontálvásárhelyi református püspök életrajzához*. Református Keresztyén Egyház, Bácsfeketehegy, 2008.; Matuska, Márton: *Értünk éltek, haltak. A nyájáért veszejtett Gachal János püspök és ifj.*

The head of the monastery in Novi Sad was Krizosztom Körösztsős, who had previously worked among the Hungarian-Americans and had also travelled to the Don Canyon. He was born in Pécs on 10 January 1909. He entered the Franciscan Order on 11 September 1925, took his monastic vows on 20 December 1930 and was ordained a priest on 19 June 1932. In July 1943, as superior of the monastery in Szécsény, he became the superior of the newly founded monastery in Novi Sad, and pastor of the Bukovina Szeklers, Croats and Swabians settled in Bácska. Despite his age of thirty-five, he was called “old monk” (*öregbarát*) because of his haggard appearance. Threatened, he was repeatedly offered repatriation, but at the last minute, he said, “As long as believers come to church, the priest cannot leave those entrusted to him”. The Serbian troops reached Novi Sad on St. John the Baptist feast on 23 October 1944. The partisans gathered the men after the town had been taken, but even they offered to flee to the “öregbarát”. Father Krizosztom would have taken advantage of this only if his fellow monks had been released, but this was no longer possible. They were driven into barracks, where the believers were confessed and consoled for days. On the morning of 27 October, Father Krizosztom and several other men were herded into a neighbouring barrack, with the promise that they would be released later in the day. The next day, on the evening of 28 October, they beat the men to death while playing military music. The prisoners were tied in threes and forced to run while being beaten with rifles to the sound of music. The “old” Franciscan priest was also beaten to death.

The parallel case¹⁸⁵ of the thirty-four Franciscans killed a few months later in Široki Brijeg, Bosnia-Herzegovina, also by partisans, confirms our view that the death of Krizosztom Körösztsős was not only and primarily the result of ethnic conflict but of hatred against the Church.

Another martyr of the Novi Sad monastery was Father Kristóf Kovács, born in Jászberény on 16 December 1914. He entered the Franciscan Order,

Thomka Károly esperes mártíromsága. In: Bereczky András (szerk.): *Mártírok százada. '56 és a XX. század magyar református lelkészvértanúi. A NyEMRLSz hittudományi tanácskozása, Felsőőr/Oberwart Ausztria, 2016. július 14–17.* Kairosz Kiadó, Budapest 2017, 107–117.; Higyed, István Levente: Gachal János (1881–1944) mártír püspök emlékezete. In: *Református Szemle* 114. vol 5. no (2021), 530–552.

185 A summary of their martyrdom: P. Jozo Zovko OFM: *Kilenced a Široki Brijeg-i vértanúkhöz*, n.p., n.d.

the Capistran range of Order on 29 August 1933, took monastic vows on 8 September 1937 and was ordained a priest on 29 June 1938. In 1944, he asked his provincial to go to Novi Sad because he wanted to be a martyr for Christ. He too was arrested on 26 October 1944. According to witnesses, Father Kristóf talked to the prisoners whenever he could and was respected by all for his humanity. On 1 November, he was driven to Petrovaradin with his fellow religious, Fr. Mihály Kamarás and other prisoners. They marched during the day and did confessing at night because the believers, seeing the danger of death, often wanted to put their lives in order even after long decades. On 2 November, they had to continue the march. The priests were abused with extreme cruelty. Their presence as pastors was classified as a service to the fascists. Father Kristóf and Father Mihály were forced to run carrying weapons while Kristóf was beaten with an iron rod and a rifle. His forehead was cracked open by the blows of the iron rod, and he could not walk. His companions helped him, but he fainted. His last words were, "Sic debuit esse!"¹⁸⁶ The soldiers threw him on a truck and shot him dead on the outskirts of the village of Инђија / Inđija.

Church casualties at the end of World War II

At the end of the Second World War, many churchmen became victims of the advancing front. Although it cannot be spoken of persecution of the church yet, there was opposition to the church or priests and pastors. One of the main reasons for the manifestations against churchmen was the fact that churchmen acted against Soviet soldiers who were abusing women and were killed or shot as a reaction. In addition, at the end of the war, there were several instances of Russian soldiers shooting and killing church people as a consequence of an argument or confrontation.¹⁸⁷

The church victims murdered at the end of the Second World War were, without completeness, the following persons:

Vilmos Apor, Roman Catholic priest, county bishop of Győr;

¹⁸⁶ "This is how it should be done!"

¹⁸⁷ In this paper, I focus specifically on the victims who were murdered, and I do not describe the victims of the war who lost their lives, for example, because of the bombing.

János Bergendy, Roman Catholic priest, diocesan pastor of Székesfehérvár,
office director Székesfehérvár;
Gyula Csaba, Lutheran pastor, pastor of the parish of Péter;
János Gáspár, Roman Catholic priest, pastor of the diocese of Székesfehérvár,
parish priest of Iszkaszentgyörgy
Zénó Hajnal, Franciscan monk, head of the house, Nagyatád;
Kornél Hummel, Roman Catholic priest, pastor of the Esztergom diocese,
Budapest;
Alajos Szalay, Roman Catholic priest, diocesan pastor of Győr;
Pál Martincsevics, Roman Catholic priest, diocesan pastor of Veszprém,
parish priest of Gyékényes;
Sándor Padányi, Roman Catholic priest, pastor of the diocese of Veszprém,
parish priest of Inke;
József Zarka, Roman Catholic priest, pastor of the diocese of Veszprém,
parish priest of Pakod.

Kornél Hummel, a priest of the Esztergom Archdiocese, who had been a defender of women, was murdered in January 1945.

Kornél Hummel was born in Budapest on 12 July 1907. He was ordained a priest on 29 June 1929 by Cardinal Justinian Serédi, archbishop of Esztergom. From July 1932, he was a chaplain in Budapest-Zuglói, and in 1933, he was also a faith teacher in the fourteenth district of Budapest in the National Association for the Support of the Blind. In the autumn of 1944, he worked with Tibor Baránszky in the rescue of persecuted Jews. During the siege, he moved to the Institute for the Blind. On 10 January 1945, Russian soldiers entered the bunker of the Institute for the Blind. On 17 January 1945, the residents of the institute confessed to Kornél Hummel. A Russian soldier entered the institute and tried to rape a blind girl. István Hickel, the caretaker of the institute, called Kornél Hummel to help prevent the violence. Hummel stood in front of the girl in a defensive position and then got into an altercation with a Russian soldier who shot him in the heart.¹⁸⁸

188 Meszlényi, Antal: *Magyar szentek és szentéletű magyarok*. München, 1976. 245–266.; Mészáros, István: *Ismeretlen vértanúk az Esztergom-Budapesti Főegyházmegye XX. századi történetében*. Esztergom Budapesti Főegyházmegye – Szent Gellért Kiadó és Nyomda, Budapest, 2000. 65–69. Hetényi Varga, Károly:

The day after Kornél Hummel's death, another priest of the Esztergom diocese became a victim of the occupying Soviet troops. István Ruppert was shot dead in the garden of the Károlyi Palace in Budapest, presumably for defending women.

István Ruppert was born in Hercegfalva on 15 May 1914. He was an apprentice priest in the diocese of Esztergom and studied theology at the Pázmáneum in Vienna. He was ordained a priest on 10 July 1938 in the chapel of the Pázmáneum. Then, he became a chaplain in Dorog. From 1939, he taught at the Institute of Notre Dame de Sion in Budapest, from 1940 in Levice, from 1941 in the St. László Gymnasium in the X. district of Budapest, and from 1942 in the Eötvös József Gymnasium. In 1943, he obtained a doctorate in canon law from Pázmány Péter University. In 1944, he brought food and linen to prisoners in Gestapo prisons and wafers and wine to priests for mass. During the siege of Budapest, he moved to the Central Seminary. He was commissioned by his archpastor as the chief chaplain of the air force in the centre of Pest. On 18 January 1945, he was shot dead by Soviet soldiers in the park of the Károlyi Palace.¹⁸⁹

János Bergendy, the office director of the Diocese of Székesfehérvár, was shot by the marching Soviet soldiers in the Bishop's Palace of Székesfehérvár on 22 March 1945.

János Bergendy was born in Vajkirályfalva on 20 November 1892. The seminarian of the Diocese of Székesfehérvár was ordained a priest on 31 May 1916 by Bishop Ottokár Prohászka. Then, he became a chaplain in Adony, and then in Dunapentele. From 1921, he was a teacher of the faith in Csepel, and from 1926 in Pilisvörösvár. From 1928, he organised the parish in Albertfalva, and from 1933 he was parish priest of Székesfehérvár-Víziváros, then office director. In 1938, he received the title of papal chamberlain. He was

Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában. I. Új Ember – Márton Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2004. 2nd edition, Eds.: Fejérdy András, Fejérdy Gergely, Soós Viktor Attila 148–150.

189 Mészáros, István: *Ismeretlen vértanúk az Esztergom-Budapesti Főegyházmegye XX. századi történetében. Esztergom Budapesti Főegyházmegye – Szent Gellért Kiadó és Nyomda, Budapest, 2000. 69–75. Hetényi, Varga Károly: Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában. I. Új Ember – Márton Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2004. 2nd edition, eds: Fejérdy András, Fejérdy Gergely, Soós Viktor Attila 28.*

the founder of the Diocesan Savings Bank Ltd. Bishop Lajos Shvoy and his immediate colleagues were arrested in February 1945, leaving only two priests in the Bishopric of Székesfehérvár. They were trying to provide for the cc. three hundred civilians who had fled the area. The Russians invaded Székesfehérvár for the second time on 21 March 1945. János Bergendy, the office manager, stayed up all night and provided accommodation for two Russian officers in the porter's lodge, who deterred the raiders with their presence. They left the building in the morning. A new group of looters arrived at the bishopric, whom János Bergendy failed to disarm with a good word. The rioting soldiers started beating the office manager and then pushed him into an office, where they shot him.¹⁹⁰

The Soviet soldiers murdered another priest of the Diocese of Székesfehérvár, namely, János Gáspár, the parish priest of Iszakszentgyörgy.

János Gáspár was born in Csécse, Nógrád County, on 25 March 1906. He was a priest in the diocese of Székesfehérvár and was ordained a priest in 1930: a chaplain in Szabadbattyán (1930–1932), Érd (1932–1934), Káloz (1934–1936), Perkáta (1936–1937), and Székesfehérvár-Víziváros (1937–1939). He was a parish priest in Iszkaszentgyörgy between 1939 and 18 March 1945. Gáspár was shot by Soviet soldiers.¹⁹¹

Alajos Szalay, a priest of the Diocese of Győr, was murdered by Soviet soldiers in Győr on 28 March 1945.

Alajos Szalay was born in Bősárkány on 28 May 1910. He graduated from the Czuczor Gergely Benedictine High School in Győr, studied at the Theological College of Győr, and was ordained a priest on 23 June 1935. Then, he became the curator of the Rákócziánium, a chaplain from 1937 in Csorna, and between 1942 and 1943, he studied at Pázmány Péter University, where he obtained

190 *Inter arma 1944–1945. Fegyverek közt. Válogatás a második világháború egyházmegyei történetének forrásaiból.* Edited and the introduction and notes written by Mózessy, Gergely. Székesfehérvári Püspöki és Székeskáptalani Levéltár, Székesfehérvár, 2004. 298–303.; Hetényi Varga, Károly: *Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában.* I. Új Ember – Márton Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2004. 2nd edition, eds: Fejérdy András, Fejérdy Gergely, Soós Viktor Attila 444.

191 *Inter arma, 1944–1945.* Ed.: Mózessy Gergely. Székesfehérvár, Püspöki Levéltár, 2004, 303–304.

a doctorate in canon law. From 1 September 1944, he was the chaplain of the St. Kamillus Parish in Győr-Nádorváros. Finally, he was shot dead by Soviet soldiers in the church corridor. He was buried in Bősárkány on 10 May 1945.¹⁹²

Like Alajos Szalay, Vilmos Apor, the county bishop of Győr, was murdered by Soviet soldiers who were marching to Győr. He defended women and stood up to the Soviet soldiers.

Vilmos Apor was born in Segesvár on 29 February 1892. He was descended from the baronial branch of a long-established Transylvanian noble family, his noble ancestry being Altorjai. He graduated in theology in Innsbruck and was ordained priest in Nagyvárad on 24 August 1915. He was a chaplain in Gyula, from 1917, he was a prefect and teacher of the seminary in Várad, and from 1918 he was the parish priest of Gyula. He became the appointed Bishop of Győr on 21 January 1941 and was consecrated in Gyula on 24 February 1941. He did a lot to help the poor and those in difficulty, using his wealth, influence, and leadership to help those in need. In between, he stood up for those persecuted because of their origins and mistreated during the German occupation and the Arrow Cross; he gave them asylum letters and hid them. He empathised with the plight of people threatened by Soviet troops and gave shelter in the cellars of the Bishop's Castle in Győr. On 28 March 1945, the siege of Győr began. On 30 March, after refusing to extradite women who had fled to his residence, a Soviet soldier mortally wounded him in a scuffle. On 2 April, Easter Monday, he died of his wounds at one o'clock in the morning. His body was buried in the crypt of the Carmelite Church in Győr. He was laid to rest in the cathedral on 23 May 1986. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 9 November 1997.¹⁹³

192 Hetényi Varga, Károly: *Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában*. I. Új Ember – Márton Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2004. 2nd edition, eds.: Fejérdy András, Fejérdy Gergely, Soós Viktor Attila, 413.

193 Hetényi Varga, Károly: *Papi sorsok a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában*. I. Új Ember – Márton Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2004. 2nd edition, eds.: Fejérdy András, Fejérdy Gergely, Soós Viktor Attila 382–384.

Several priests were murdered in the Diocese of Veszprém at the end of World War II. A Franciscan monk, Zénó Hajnal, and three priests of the Diocese of Veszprém, Pál Martincsevics, Sándor Padányi and József Zarka, were victims of the occupying soldiers. All three of them were brutally murdered.¹⁹⁴

In the last phase of World War II, in March 1945, Nagyatád was in the battle zone of the German and Soviet troops.¹⁹⁵

As the front approached, the military ordered the population to leave. Then, Zénó Hajnal, a Franciscan head of household, took the lead, and under his leadership, the people left Nagyatád to save their lives. They headed for Gyékényes, where Bulgarian and German troops faced each other on the outskirts of the town in the heat of 1945. On Easter Sunday, 1 April, Bulgarian soldiers occupied the village, house by house. Finally, they reached the parish, from where they lured out the parish priest, Pál Martincsevics, and Zénó Hajnal, who was hiding with him. The population was put on the march. During the march, a Bulgarian soldier on horseback appeared, who, seeing the two priests – wearing habits and cassocks – turned back, called them out of the crowd and drew his pistol. First, he shot Pál Martincsevics, then Zénó Hajnal, and when they collapsed, he fired a further volley at them. Only the Hungarians were executed.¹⁹⁶

Pál Martincsevics was born in Nagytílaj on 25 October 1909. He was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Veszprém on 23 June 1935. He was a chaplain in Zákány (1935-1936), in Csurgó (1936–1937), and served as a parish priest in Gyékényes between 1937 and 1945.

194 *Folytonos fegyverroportás közepette. Források a veszprémi egyházmegye második világháborús veszteségeiről I.* Ed. Varga, Tibor László. Veszprémi Érseki és Főképtalani Levéltár, Veszprém, 2015. 99, 113, 278–279, 280, 289, 328, 335, 339; „Püspök urat is őrizetbe veszem”. *Források a veszprémi egyházmegye második világháborús veszteségeiről II.* Ed. Varga Tibor László. Veszprémi Érseki és Főképtalani Levéltár, Veszprém, 2018. 17, 18, 20, 23–24, 26, 27–28, 30–32, 35–38, 40–42, 46, 192, 640.

195 The situation of Nagyatád and the story of the martyrdom of P. Zénó is summarised by Kelemen Király, OFM: *Naplóm*. Kárpát Könyvkiadó, Cleveland, 1974. 226.

196 Report from the Roman Catholic Parish of Gyékényes on the circumstances of the death of Paul Martincsevics, no. 169/1947. and Hetényi Varga, Károly: *Szerzetesek a horogkereszt és a vörös csillag árnyékában 1.* Pécs, 1999. 457–458. Personal recollections are consistent with the reports of contemporary sources.

Zénó Hajnal was born on 25 October 1900 in Vaskó, Bihar County. At his baptism, he was given the name József; at his confirmation, he was called János; at his ordination Zénó, and in the 1920s, he changed his surname – Pulvermann – to Hajnal. He was ordained on 27 August 1917 and took his simple vows in the Franciscan Order on 27 August 1918. He took his perpetual vows on 30 July 1924 in the monastery of Veszprém, in the hands of his superior, Fr. P. Burka Kelemen. His ordination took place in Nagykanizsa on 29 June 1925, performed by Franciscan Bishop István Zadravec, OFM. From 1925 he was vicar of the Reformed monastery of Veszprém and prefect of the minor seminary. From 1928, he was a member of the order of Nagykanizsa, and church director in Kiskanizsa. Between 1930 and 1931, he was a chaplain and faith teacher in the parish of Szombathely, and in 1932 he was confessor and cantor in the seminary in Budapest. In 1933, he became the prefect of the Franciscan High School in Esztergom, between 1934 and 1935, he was a pastor in Roebing, and in 1936 in Bordentown (New Jersey). In 1936-1937, he was again prefect and English teacher in Esztergom, and in 1938 he moved to Nagykanizsa, where he became parish priest. He worked there until 1940, when his prefect transferred him to Nagyatád, where he was the leader of the religious community, magister of the lay brothers, administrator and faith teacher of the parish, member of the discretory of the Upper Szeged monastery, clerk of the house history and librarian, and leader of various parish groups.

The diocesan authorities were informed of the execution by the bishop's commissioner of the area as follows: "On 7 April, we heard that the Parish Priest Pál Martincsevics of Gyékényes and the head of the house, Zénó Hajnal, of Nagyatád, had died from gunshot wounds in the fighting around Gyékényes. We have received conflicting reports about the reasons for this, probably because soldiers in civilian clothes also fired at the Russian troops, which they took as partisan activity and shot at the civilian population."¹⁹⁷ A month later, he, too, confirmed the news: "I also reported that the parish

197 Letter of 13 April 1945 from Bishop Commissioner György Kiss to Bishop József Mindszenty of Veszprém. In: *Folytonos fegyverroportogás közepette. Források a veszprémi egyházmegye második világháborús veszteségeiről I.* Ed. Varga, Tibor László. Veszprémi Érseki és Főkáptalani Levéltár, Veszprém, 2015. 335.

priests Pál Martincsevics of Gyékényes, Sándor Padányi of Inkei and Zénó Hajnal P. of Nagyatád lost their lives as a result of a Russian bullet. All three deaths occurred on or about Holy Saturday.”¹⁹⁸

The Parish Priest Sándor Padányi was brutally tortured and murdered by the occupying Soviet troops.

Padányi (until 1905 Pezenhoffer) Sándor was born in Zalaszentiván on 16 September 1884. He completed his theological studies in Veszprém and was ordained a priest on 27 June 1907. He was a chaplain in Mernye, from 30 June 1911 in Látvány, from 7 January 1912 in Csabrendek, and from 1 September 1913 in Felsőörs. He became a provisional administrator in Szentkirályszabadja (November-December 1914) and an administrator in Felsőörs from 13 November 1916. He worked in Inke from 1920: as a parish priest from 1 July 1930. On 31 March 1945, when the Soviet troops entered the village, he was dragged into the Reformed school courtyard and tortured there. Károly Hetényi Varga writes about the circumstances of his death: “The Russian troops besieging the village found out that the priest from Inke was in good relations with the German soldiers stationed there. This priest, however, was not Sándor Padányi but his chaplain, who had fled to Darvaspuszta when the Germans withdrew. When the Russians marched in, Father Padányi was dragged into the courtyard of the Reformed school and brutally tortured. His teeth were knocked out. The parish priest, who died of torture, was thrown by the Russians on a manure heap, and a few shovels of dirty straw were thrown over his corpse. His sister picked him up weeks later and took him to the cemetery.”¹⁹⁹

Lutheran pastor Gyula Csaba was murdered by local communist party members on 30 April 1945.

Gyula Csaba was born in Békéscsaba on 14 September 1882. He completed his secondary schools in Békéscsaba and Hódmezővásárhely, then studied at

198 Letter of 24 May 1945 from Bishop Commissioner György Kiss to Bishop József Mindszenty of Veszprém. In: *Folytonos fegyverroportás közepette. Források a veszprémi egyházmegye második világháborús veszteségeiről I.* Ed. Varga Tibor László. Veszprémi Érseki és Főképtalani Levéltár, Veszprém, 2015. 339–340.

199 Mirák, Katalin: A potrohos papok végórja. In memoriam Csaba Gyula. In: *Híd.* Evangélikus Missziós Magazin. 41–43.

the Lutheran Theological Academy in Sopron. He became a pastor in 1905. Then, he worked as an assistant pastor in Sajókaza and as a parish priest in Újcsanáros from 1907. In 1914, he was called by the Evangelical Parish of Péter to be its pastor, where he served for thirty-one years and was also the sub-legate for the education of the Central Evangelical Diocese of Pest County. In the spring of 1945, in the district of Gyömrő, the local communist directorate murdered several members of the leading intellectuals and landowners in the area with cruelty. "It's the last hour of the fat priests' death" was one of the slogans of the revenge campaign, and Gyula Csaba was one of the victims of this series of murders. On 30 April 1945, he went on foot from Péteri to Gyömrő for burial. On the way, he was arrested by police, but as he had a Hungarian and Russian language permit for free movement, he was allowed to continue his journey. That night, however, he was dragged from his home. He was missing, but locals knew he had been killed too. It was only in 1989, during a fact-finding investigation into the murders, that his family learned exactly what had happened to him that night in May: he had been executed in a bestiary on the outskirts of Gyömrő, his eyes gouged out, his tongue torn out and his body disgraced. His body was never found, and it is still unknown where his killers buried him. Since 2006, the memory of the unburied dead of the Lutheran Church has been preserved by a plaque in the Lutheran high school in Békéscsaba. The congregation of Péteri has commemorated him annually since 1983. The memorial place of the martyred pastor was established in the cemetery of the village in 1992.²⁰⁰

Priest murders after the 1956 revolution

In the year following the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight, Roman Catholic priests were murdered primarily as a deterrent. The victims were pastors who were working with young people. The procedures following the murders of priests were characterised by a lack of substantive investigation and by the fact that the persons convicted had only a partial connection with the murder. A specific feature of the action against clergy is that the perpetrators murdered

200 Mirák, Katalin: A potrohos papok végórája. In memoriam Csaba Gyula. In: *Híd*. Evangélikus Missziós Magazin. 41–43.

with particular cruelty. It was also a characteristic of these brutal acts that they were disguised as accidents, or that they attempted to trivialise the act itself.

Lajos Kenyeres

Lajos Kenyeres, the parish priest of Tiszavárkony, was an active public figure and wrote several letters to high-ranking political leaders to draw attention to himself.

Lajos Kenyeres was born as the son of a bell-ringer in Rákóczifalva on 3 January 1908. He graduated from the State High School in Szolnok and completed his theological studies in Vác, where he was ordained a priest in 1930. He served as a chaplain and faith teacher in Üllő, Szentcsanak, Szentcsanak, Újpest, Hatvan-Belváros, Valkó, Csépa, Cegléd, Tizsakürt, Kiskundorozsma and Pestszenterzsébet. In 1946, he became a parish priest in Tiszavárkony, not far from his home village. The main focus of his diversified pastoral activity was the education of young people. His sermons and exhortations to youth were also published in print, and he wrote faith books for the students of the seventh and eighth grades of folk schools. In 1956, he wrote letters to the Petőfi Circle and Yuri Andropov, the Soviet ambassador in Budapest. On 28 February 1957, he disappeared on his way home from the neighbouring village of Vezseny. It was rumoured that he had 'defected'. His body was found exactly one year later near Martfű, in the flooding Tisza. It was later discovered that on the day of his death, six or seven "chubby" men were lying in wait for him at the Tisza dam, attacked him, beat him, shot him in the back of the head and buried his body under the riverbank.²⁰¹

Pál Szekuli

Pál Szekuli was born in Hajmáskér on 25 May 1925. He entered the Piarist Order on 27 August 1944. He was a novice in Vác and Tata, took solemn vows on 25 March 1949, and was ordained a priest on 21 June 1950. From 1946, he studied arithmetic and physics at the University of Budapest, but in 1950 he was forced to leave the university together with several of his religious fellows. From September 1950, he served as a chaplain in Somlósztölcs and from March 1951 in Látvány. In December 1952, he was arrested, held in the

201 Varga, Lajos: Dokumentumok Kenyeres Lajos vértanúságának történetéhez. *Vigilia*, 2008/11. 867–871.

Prison of Vác, and worked as a prison labourer in the coal mine in Dorog. On 10 September 1956, he became a chaplain in Öskü with the ailing and elderly Parish Priest József Miklós. On 7 December 1957, he was found dead in the well of the parish in Öskü. The police first tried to establish the suspicion of love affairs and suicide, then blamed the elderly parish priest and his housekeeper. Both were eventually acquitted by the court for lack of evidence. Thanks to Frigyes Kahler's research, it is now known that the political police of the party-state were responsible for the brutal act.²⁰²

János Brenner

János Brenner was born in Szombathely on 27 December 1931. After the nationalisation of church schools in 1948, he applied to Zirc as an oblate to continue his studies in the monastic order of the Premonstratensian Gymnasium in Szombathely. After the revocation of the monastic orders' operating licence in 1950, he studied in Budapest for a year under conditions of illegality. Then he applied for admission to the Diocese of Szombathely. He completed his theological studies first in Szombathely and then, after the merger of the seminaries, in Győr. He became a chaplain in Szentgotthárd-Rábakethely, where he cultivated good relations with the parishioners of the area, especially the young people. Several attempts were made to have him placed with his bishop, and he was threatened, but he did not give in and continued his pastoral work. On the night of 14 to 15 December 1957, he was lured from the parish on the pretext of caring for the sick and murdered in a premeditated and brutally cruel manner, stabbed several times.

202 Kahler, Frigyes: *Rejtély Öskün. Szekuli Pál segédlelkész titokzatos halála*. Budapest, Kairosz, 2007.

During the attack, he protected the Blessed Sacrament he was carrying so that it would not come to any harm. Two persons were convicted (in separate cases) and acquitted. On 8 November 2017, Pope Francis authorised Cardinal Angelo Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, to publish a decree recognising the heroic virtues of the Servant of God, opening the way for his beatification, which took place in Szombathely on 1 May 2018.²⁰³

Under the Soviet-style dictatorship, many churchmen became victims of persecution during the period of the emerging party-state. Church and secular persons were interned, deported, placed under house arrest, and imprisoned, but the harshest and most brutal action against them was their murder. They were killed with extreme cruelty because they were priests and because they lived their faith, being active pastors. In this study, I considered, without claiming to be exhaustive, the clergymen and victims who were murdered at the end of the Second World War, afterwards, or during the period of reprisals following the 1956 revolution.

203 Császár, István – Soós, Viktor Attila: *Magyar Tárziciusz. Brenner János élete és vértanúsága 1931–1957*. Szentgotthárd, Brenner János Emlékhely Alapítvány, 2003. Kahler, Frigyes: *Egy papgyilkosság a jogtörténész szemével. Brenner János volt rábakethelyi káplán meggyilkolásának körülményei és az ügy utóélete*. Szentgotthárd, Brenner János Emlékhely Alapítvány, 2005.; Császár, István – Soós, Viktor Attila (eds.): *Nem félek. Brenner János 1931–1957*. Szentgotthárd, Brenner János Emlékhely Alapítvány, 2009.; Soós, Viktor Attila: A nyomozati eljárás a Brenner-gyilkosság ügyében. *Vasi Szemle*, 2012/1. 77–97.; Soós, Viktor Attila: Titkos jelentések a Brenner-gyilkosság utáni időszakból. *Vasi Szemle*, 2012/2. 212–235.; Soós, Viktor Attila: Jogi eljárások Brenner János sérelmére elkövetett gyilkosság után. *Vasi Szemle*, 2012/3. 328–346.; Soós, Viktor Attila: „Politikai tevékenységet nem végzett, egyéniségével vonzotta az embereket.” Brenner János életútja. In: *Halálra ítélve – papi sorsok '56 után*. Eds.: Bellavics István, Földváryné Kiss Réka. Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága – Országgház Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2018. 62–71.



Selye János Egyetem
Református Teológiai Kar

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Všetci, ktorí zomreli v Kristovi, sú šťastní” Maďarskí mučeníci Vyznávajúcej cirkvi

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Mgr. Tömösközi Ferenc, PhD., a Selye János Egyetem Református

Teológiai Kara Történeti Tudományok Tanszékének oktatója

Szakmai lektor / Odborný lektor:

Mgr. Pólya Katalin, PhD.

Selye János Egyetem Református Teológiai Kar, Rendszeres és Gyakorlati Teológiai Tanszék.

Pető Bálint, PhD.

Szegedi Tudományegyetem Juhász Gyula Pedagógusképző Kar, Mozgóképkultúra Tanszék

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