

The Peace Seekers: The Hungarian Student Movement for National Independence in 1944

*Recollections by
János Horváth*

On December 14, 1944, I was arrested by the *Nemzeti Számonkérő Szék* (Court of National Reckoning), an Arrow-Cross detachment of the Hungarian military police operating in collaboration with the Gestapo.* They wanted to liquidate the *Szabad Élet* (Free Life) student movement, a network of resistance activists that served as a focal point of a broader alliance, the Hungarian Youths' Freedom Front. My captors employed an assortment of tortures in pursuit of their goals. They possessed fragmentary knowledge about our movement and sought details regarding specific activities and organizational arrangements, such as (1) the production and dissemination of leaflets, pamphlets, manifestoes, newsletters, posters, (2) our underground bureau issuing false identification documents, (3) the sabotage project, (4) coordination with the Hungarian Youths' Freedom Front, (5) contacts with the political and military leaders of the Hungarian Independence Movement, (6) contacts and collaboration with communists, (7) contacts with Jewish organizations, (8) international contacts.

Driven by passionate vengeance, the Court of National Reckoning proceeded to court-martial our group of twelve young

*Editor's note: The literal translation of this term is Chair (Bench) of National Reckoning (or Retribution). One North American author describes this "blood court of the Arrow Cross party" as a reorganized unit of the "field gendarmerie." See Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford, California Hoover Institution Press, 1970), pp. 235f.

men and promulgated several death sentences. We were saved only by the unexpected advance of the Soviet Army to the immediate neighbourhood of the Margit Boulevard Military Prison on Christmas night. During the subsequent confusion we were transported numerous times, to be held in turn by the German Gestapo, Hungarian jail-guards and Arrow-Cross brigades. While being passed from one stage to another on January 17, 1945, I found a miraculous escape at a schoolbuilding's basement water tap by stumbling into Gyula Gombos and was led by him to the hiding place of Zoltán Tildy, Albert Bereczky, Viktor Csornoky and their families.

My brief compendium of events that unfold here will touch upon episodes remaining thus far only fragmentarily recorded by participants and historians alike. I hope that my present writing may turn out to be an encouragement to others to describe their own role and experience.

The Underground Student Resistance

On March 19, 1944 the German military occupation of Hungary brought to a grinding halt the government's effort to scale down and abandon participation in the war. In spite of the imposition of a pro-Hitler regime, the nation's desire for peace and reforms could not be halted. The occupying power forced the Hungarian Independence Movement underground.

I gradually found myself involved with underground activities. What might count as a first step was that I did continue meetings with others to plan for peace and reforms even after the banning of organizations and the arrest of leaders. The substance of our discussions was how to bring about peace and how to prepare for the building of a new Hungary. We envisioned reforms for a just, enlightened and prosperous country. We wanted a parliamentary democracy to stimulate self-determination and decentralized decision-making in all political, economic, social and cultural matters. The populist literature of the immediate past decade was our much cherished food for thought.

The inherent dynamics of an underground movement carried us toward activism. When the freedom of speech and assembly are banned, the written word is the next available method of sharing one's thoughts. But the writing down of things in defiance of prohibition tends to generate symbolic attributes.

The idea receives more careful clarification and expressions become more polished, as if subconsciously suspecting that a particular piece of writing might turn out to be the last composition in the author's life. The pressure is intensified by the awareness that the illegal text, if discovered by the authorities, will incriminate not only the writer, but also the reproducer, the reader, the transmitter and, not infrequently, even some totally uninvolved individuals.

Our initial writings drew heavily on quotations from poems and excerpts from prose. The selections were arranged so as to accentuate the country's predicament. Poet Endre Ady was quoted most frequently while excerpts were also drawn from a broad assortment of writers, philosophers, scholars, scientists, artists and statesmen. In due course the quotations and excerpts shrank while the commentaries grew in length to expand into full-blown articles. With the passage of time, we recognized the need for disseminating news so that information could be spread regarding vital issues. The main themes were (1) the unconstitutionality of the German-imposed regime and the arrest of Members of Parliament and other national leaders, (2) the inhuman treatment of the Jews and efforts to sabotage Eichmann's schemes, (3) data on the Allied Powers' superiority and the inevitability of German defeat, (4) Hitler's design to sacrifice Hungary in rear-guard fighting, (5) the Atlantic Charter and other pronouncements of the Allied Powers to guarantee Hungary's independence after the war, (6) the brutality of German occupation forces in Poland, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, (7) the ever-widening Hungarian resistance and the sabotaging of efforts, (8) glimpses into the future era of peace and reconstruction.

While engaged in creating this information, we came to recognize that our efforts became true underground operations. Such quantitative growth and qualitative refinement could have resulted only from the peerless leadership of Sándor Kiss, a Professor of Philosophy at the Teachers' Academy. Indeed, the history of 1944 Hungary remains incomplete until taking into account Kiss' role. At the year's beginning the unity council of all democratic student assemblies had claimed him as their leader. By the summer's end he was drafted to preside over the evolving alliance of national youth organizations student, worker, peasant and church-affiliated associations. By November he was

co-opted an insider of the underground national political leadership.

I had known Sándor Kiss since 1941. We became friends after 1943 when he came to a workshop meeting of the *Kaláka Szolgálat* (Kaláka Service) held at the premises of the Pozsonyi Street Reformed Church in Budapest. I was a co-organizer of the event jointly with István B. Rácz and Lajos Imre. The main theme of the symposium was a fashionable topic: Hungary's gloomy future between the grindstones of German and Russian empires. The tone of the meeting resounded cherished chords in the mind and heart of Sándor Kiss. He was moved by the participants' objectivity and humility. This was unusual considering the status of several participants, including Albert Bereczky, and Klára Zsindely Tüdős. Bereczky, a Reformed Church minister, was highly respected in the society. He was an effective intermediary between the political establishment and the left-wing opposition, and also a behind-the-scenes adviser to Regent Miklós Horthy. Klára Zsindely Tüdős, with her cabinet-minister husband, was perceived as one of the guardians of Pál Teleki's political heritage. She was a charming socialite, a patron of the leftist Győrffy College and a prosperous fashion designer. Sándor Kiss felt comfortable with this group and was readily accepted as a full partner. He was impressed enough to accept our invitation to join Kaláka Service's Executive Committee, which thereafter consisted of Lajos Imre, Sándor Kiss, István B. Rácz, Rezső Szij and myself.

In the course of the forthcoming year Sándor Kiss viewed his role truly seriously at Kaláka and participated in all its activities, including frequent membership meetings and special projects which all coalesced into various blends of Bible reading, poetry recital, folksong practice, theatre goings and weekend hiking. A popular and well-endowed Kaláka project was the sending of books into Hungarian villages expected to become again part of Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia after the war's end. Beyond its declared merit, this project served as a cover of legitimacy during the subsequent underground activities.

My own involvement in the student independence movement consisted of the operation of the centre responsible for the print shop, documents and liaisons. As I held a full-time job with managerial responsibilities, I was able to secure the facilities, equipment and resources essential for the operation. Because my

workplace became the main centre of the student underground activities, it is important to describe some of the pertinent arrangements.

Back in 1940 when I initially enrolled as a student in the Faculty of Economics of the József Nádor Polytechnic and Economics University, Budapest, I also took a job with the Futura National Marketing Centre. I was assigned to work in the accounting department of a major subsidiary, the Nostra National Warehouse Corporation with headquarters in Budapest and about 45 plants across the country. Within a few years I was advanced to the position of Deputy Chief Accountant an unusual career for a young man which could be explained by innovative adaptation of the latest accounting techniques just evolving in the university seminar to problems of a fast-growing business. Consequently, in 1944 I was in charge of a sizeable operation with control over substantial resources as well as freedom of movement across the country.

In April 1944 when the Allied Powers inflicted heavy bombing damage on Budapest, my department was evacuated to the village of Abony, on the Budapest-Szolnok road. Within weeks there evolved an auxiliary of the underground Free Life Student Movement with István B. Rácz and myself in residence, Sándor Kiss and Lajos Imre frequent guests for days. The Kaláka Service also branched out to Abony where we established friendly contact with Rezső Sedhy-Lengyel, a chaplain at the Roman Catholic parish. It was here that my two co-workers at the office, Erzsébet Beke, accountant, and Margit Holló, secretary, became deeply involved with Kaláka and subsequently with the underground print shop. My offices in Abony and Budapest had daily contact by a courier automobile in which we easily travelled and transported underground material. By the second half of the summer I kept reproducing a variety of manifestoes and leaflets as manuscripts reached me from Kiss, Rácz and others. In the meanwhile the dangers of underground activities became increasingly real. Arrests, interrogations and surveillance compelled caution. A group of students, including some Free Life activists, were seized at the Hársfa Street Student Home. Vilmos Fitos was arrested by the Gestapo. László Vatai was held by the Gestapo for weeks. Although each of these persons was released, we could no longer ignore the chilling fact that the intelligence agencies were working hard to discover us.

Perils did mandate caution, yet the very dynamics of the underground resistance movement prompted us to seek to mobilize additional persons and to seek to enhance effectiveness through collaboration with like-minded groups. These were the motivations that caused me to travel to Kecskemét around mid-August where I was introduced to and, quite unexpectedly, initiated into the Magyar Közösség (Hungarian Community). The message arrived through András Hamza, a trusted friend, a relative, as well as partner in the underground, inviting me to come for a weekend jointly with Sedhy-Lengyel. In Kecskemét, the two of us were received by Barnabás Kiss, law professor, Bálint Kovács, pastor of the Reformed Church, and András Hamza. The five of us discussed at length the miseries of German occupation, the cruel deportation of the Jews, the gloomy prospects of the peace treaty with Hungary after the war, and the compelling necessity of severing ties with Germany as well as re-establishing good relations with the Allied Powers.

All of us recognized that at this particular time of national emergency, immediate organizing for action was imperative. At this point our host confided that they already belonged to an association, named the Hungarian Community, through which individuals reinforced their struggle for independent Hungary. In the spirit of Endre Ady, Dezső Szabó, László Németh and other populist writers, the association's operational method was to lobby for the filling of decision-making positions with individuals whose past record revealed no loyalty risk. We were invited to join. Thus our student independent movement gained new allies who could be mobilized. (I had not even the faintest notion that two-and-a-half years later this event could be twisted around by Rákosi's secret police to suspend my parliamentary immunity, to forge the charge of my conspiring against the democratic system of government and to keep me in prison for four years.)

The summer's end in 1944 saw renewed initiatives by the Horthy regime to ease Hungary out of the Axis orbit. We were informed about these efforts through Albert Bereczky, Miklós Mester and Klára Zsindely Tüdős. In the student underground publication we chose themes that dealt with national survival and the lone Magyar island in the German and Slavic ocean. The tragic outcome of October 15 proved the darkest of the gloomy prophecies. The old political establishment failed its last

comprehensive test. The coup failed to force out Hitler's war machine partly because some Hungarian military command posts were infiltrated with persons whose German background and loyalties prevailed over their Hungarian citizenship. At this crucial point they betrayed their Supreme Commander Horthy and denounced their fellow officers. Hitler succeeded in establishing Szálasi as the *Führer* of Hungary.

For the student underground movement the October 15 tragedy signalled the compelling necessity to mobilize everything and to accept greater risks. Kiss' leadership was characterized by dedication, talent, innovativeness and coordination. Henceforth, he spent substantial time in the operation centre attached to my office at the Nostra corporation headquarters near Vörösmarthy Square. Adhering to underground operational rules, to my superior and colleagues he was introduced under the name of Pál Juhász, adjunct professor from the University of Kolozsvár, with whom I was supposedly writing an accounting manual for agricultural cooperatives. I assigned to him a desk with telephone, access to a conference room and a key to the basement pretending that he drew case-study materials out of the old files stored there. It was in this basement that I established the print shop of the Free Life Student Movement. We worked with two automatic stencil duplicators, three vintage mimeographs and several typewriters. We had practically unlimited supply of stencil, paper and copying ink. The supplies had been accumulated to hedge against wartime shortages. These facilities produced between 200,000-300,000 sheets of underground material.

The prime printed product was the periodical, *Szabad Élet* (Free Life), which had under its title a caption "Journal of the Free Life Student Movement." It was published about eight times. The issues consisted of varying lengths, from five to ten pages. These issues were produced in 1,000 to 3,000 copies. The content included editorials, news, essays, documents, poems, letters, etc. The editor was László Vatai and subsequently István B. Rácz. The list of contributors included Sándor Kiss, Emil Majsay, Pál Jónás, Vilmos Fitos, András Hamza, Lajos Imre and others. One recurring feature of the publications was poetry, mostly from Ady. Co-editor István B. Rácz stood always ready to insert a befitting line, or a stanza, or a whole poem. A sample may suffice to show the thrust of the message

Presently it is the orgy of the inferior epigons,
But we ready the stones and tools,
Because we shall bring forth the grand design,
To build the magnificent, and beautiful, and human, and
Magyar.
If fate demands we shall die,
But it remains our blessed reward,
That after the cataclysm honorable men will rest under the
ruins....
Then after the hiatus, others may reassert life to continue....
Presently during the blind night of shamelessness,
Every noble outcast must guard jealously his honor....

The editorial policy and production techniques of the periodical applied to the other publications, namely leaflets, posters and manifestoes. Some were excerpted from *Free Life* most were original manuscripts, which then were reproduced in numbers of a few hundred to several thousands, and this latter group of writings were targeted at specific places, groups and occasions. In general, all publications communicated the message that the puppet Szálasi regime was illegal and that the Hungarian people wanted peace immediately. A recollection of some of the topics appears appropriate here.

(1) Reports were written about the events leading to Horthy's Proclamation which called for the preservation of national integrity, the announcement of armistice negotiations with the Soviet Union, the order to military commanders to establish contacts with the Red Army commanders so as to hasten German withdrawals.

(2) Descriptions of the arrest of Horthy in the Buda Castle and his appointed deputy, General Lajos Dálnoki Veress, at the Trans-Tisza headquarters, by German SS commandoes.

(3) Reports that in September Horthy had already sent to Moscow a distinguished delegation consisting of Géza Teleki, Domonkos Szent-Iványi and Gábor Faraghó.

(4) We urged nationwide protest of the atrocities against Jews on the grounds of humanity, Christian ethics and Hungarian chivalry.

(5) Eyewitness reports from the Warsaw uprising and its bloody oppression upon Hitler's special instruction.

(6) News of Arrow-Cross officials slaughtering Hungarian soldiers

and civilians attempting to return to their homes in Transylvania.

(7) News of the torture and execution of three military officers of the Hungarian Independence Movement: János Kiss, Jenő Nagy and Vilmos Tarcsay. (The Movement's political head, Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, was executed after another month.)

(8) A call for peace entitled *Igaz szó igaz magyarokhoz* (True word to true Hungarians) based on a joint-statement by István Vásáry, Mayor of Debrecen, Imre Révész, Bishop of the Trans-Tisza Reformed Church, and István Balogh, the Roman Catholic priest of Szeged-Alsóváros.

(9) Appeals to resist orders for the evacuation of people and national wealth to Germany.

The distribution of all student resistance publications produced in the Nostra basement were arranged by Kiss. Occasionally, I could hear him saying into the telephone "Here is Pál Juhász speaking.... Have you shipped away the potatoes? There is another consignment for transit...." Also, we sent copies by mail to a variety of addresses using postage-free envelopes of governmental bureaux and military authorities. Furthermore, each of us yielded to the temptation to hide copies at places where they would be discovered by certain persons.

Even a cursory inventory of underground resistance material produced at the Nostra premises would remain incomplete without accounting for work done for at least four other groups. Here follows a sketchy description. First, the *Magyar Ifjuság* (Hungarian Youth), a periodical published by the Freedom Front of Hungarian Youth, a broad coalition from communists on the left to senior scouts on the conservative wing, held together by Kiss. Under his direction we typed and duplicated three issues in about 1,000-2,000 copies of each. Second, the periodical *Eb Ura Fakó* edited by middle-of-the-road intellectuals in the spirit of Pál Teleki. Its stencilled copies were taken away from the print shop by István Csicsery-Rónay who always appeared in the elegant uniform of an artillery lieutenant. Third, the *Occasional Papers* of a group of policy analysts, namely Baron Ede Aczél, József Dudás, Miklós Csomós and Ernő Péter. I recall the duplication of four pieces one lengthy (around 20 pages) position paper in 100 copies and three shorter (one-two pages) leaflets. A fourth group of clients represented by Esther Valkay and two lieutenants received bundles of published material from me four or five times.

The print shop's efficient and secure operation can be attributed to the fortunate physical facilities and a faultlessly working team. The former attribute has been mentioned earlier. The latter should be acknowledged at this point. I had felt that the particular combination of efficiency and security criteria required a technically competent and well-disciplined small workforce whose members were each capable of maintaining the equipment as well as spending long blocks of time on the job. Actually, the team consisted of four persons: István B. Rácz, Sándor Kiss, Lajos Imre and myself. Each of us was able to stay in the print shop at any hour of the day or night. I was home at Nostra here, my full-time job encompassed a broad range of managerial responsibilities that took me to places in which my absence from the desk should not catch attention. Besides, my secretary and my associate accountant were sufficiently aware of my off-desk involvements to hold a facade in case of need. Sándor Kiss was known as the workaholic research professor now tangled up in locating case studies in the archives. His coming and going at odd hours was substantiated. Rácz was employed by Futura, the parent corporation of Nostra, one short city block away. He had one rather peculiar need: he came with two guns in his pocket, placed them conspicuously on the table, saying, "Now I feel like working." The irony was obvious: if the Nazi troopers found this hideout then our guns would have been of no avail. Imre poked fun at this as well as some other illusions that blurred our sense of proportions. In any case, the hideout was optimally safe from accidental discovery. As a matter of fact, this place was not the weak link in the student resistance movement which would cause our arrests in mid-December.

The print shop's smooth operation paved the way toward involvement in additional projects in the student underground movement. By the end of the summer, and particularly after October 15, the safe in my office became a clearing house for personal documents. Initially, the task appeared rather simple as long as I adhered to the strictest rules of precaution. Sándor Kiss, assuming for this operation the name of Gábor Tóth, asked me to accept, safekeep and distribute blank documents issued by governmental departments and military headquarters. We were using them illegally, but in appearance these documents were perfect: printed on the appropriate paper, stamped with the official seal and signed by the appropriate office holder. I was to

complete such a document by writing in the user's name. Usually, the object was to facilitate safe conduct for someone to accomplish a mission. Quite often, however, the objective was to assist a person to escape persecution. With the passage of time these documents became used in increasing number simply to shelter deserters from the armed forces. In exchange for a military passport, the bearer agreed to deliver our printed publications to distant places and then to return for another sojourn. In time things became quite complex. At the outset I stored military documents from a few auxiliary commands. Later I was in charge of impressive looking documents from the Supreme Command supplied by General Staff Captains István Tóth and Zoltán Mikó. One innovative distributor of these rather sensitive papers was Foreign Ministry officer Géza Kádár with whom I regularly met in the bookstore on Múzeum Boulevard. It was also here that I repeatedly met Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who coordinated a network involved in saving Jews in Budapest from Nazi brutalities. Occasionally I supplied him with military documents issued for names he specified and subsequently we met twice at the Gyáli Road Nostra warehouse to work out special arrangements for a consignment.

Another project of the Free Life Student Movement wherein I had a role was the Görgey Zászlóalj (Görgey Battalion). I recall the initial discussions to form a battalion of volunteers with the ostensible purpose of defending Budapest against the Russians, but with the real aim of preventing the use of the unit elsewhere. The secret design was to pull together several hundred men into a military unit that would seek contacts with the Red Army approaching Budapest in order to collaborate with them in minimizing destruction and loss of lives. Captains Mikó and Tóth secretly endorsed the plan and appointed Vilmos Bondor as the unit's senior lieutenant as supply officer. Three friends, Endre Csohány, Károly Nagy and Kálmán Drozdy, became the commanding officers. Additional posts were filled with people recommended by the Free Life Student Movement and many from the Hársfa Street Student Home. Zoltán Nyeste and István Füzesi became influential activists. The Kaláka Movement and the Tutaj Street Apprentices' Hostel became briefing stations as we covertly campaigned to fill the ranks with trustworthy young students and workers. During this process I had given out many

of the conventional auxiliary command forms entitled "Order to Report." Noteworthy among our schemes was an attempt to divert the Arrow-Cross snoopers' suspicion. To this end we wanted to create the impression that the batallion was a hot-bed of right-wing extremists who were despised by the left-wing underground. We planned an attack on the guard post. Three students, Tibor Zimányi, Károly Derecskey and Géza Bodolay, implemented the plan, throwing a hand grenade while ascertaining that no one should be hurt. The next day *Free Life* reported that the event was only a first warning to the pro-Szálasi Görgey Batallion. Apparently, the deception did work because the suspicions of Arrow-Cross functionaries subsided for a while.

Perhaps the most daring of our ideas was the "Second Szálasi Manifesto." Although never fully implemented, it might be appropriate to outline the project here in order to shed light on the resourcefulness of the individuals involved. In short, the project was to write, print and post in several thousand copies a manifesto patterned after the one by Szálasi during the October 15 *coup d'état*. That time Szálasi in his "Supreme Command to the Armed Nation" gave reasons for his assuming power, for pursuing the war on Hitler's side until the end, and for re-shaping Hungary in the Arrow-Cross spirit. This time we designed a fake "Second Supreme Command to the Armed Nation" in the name of Szálasi, which declared that (1) the Germans use Hungarians as cannon fodder in the war; (2) Germany betrayed the alliance with Hungary; (3) honourable peace will be worked out with the Russians, British and Americans; (4) the armed forces including the Party Brigades will offer free passing to the Russian Army in forcing out the German Army. This bogus manifesto carefully imitated the jargon of Szálasi and copied phrases from his genuine manifesto a few weeks earlier. The printing itself was to imitate fully physical appearances: typeset, paper quality and the size of the poster. Therefore, the work was to be done at the Pester Lloyd Printing Company, the producer of the original manifesto. The place was the right choice also because it produced no newspaper currently—merely governmental supplies—and therefore it was guarded by soldiers and not Party armed guards. The whole process at the printing plant was spelled out in minute details by András Hamza and his team, including Gyula Ibrányi, Imre Bense, Sándor Arany, with the assurance of support from the Görgey Batallion. The special

written order to assure access to the printing press was forged in the name of Béla Kerekes, Deputy Minister of Justice, and endorsed by Emil Kovarcz, Propaganda Minister. The project was aborted because of security considerations one day before operation, and was to be re-scheduled later. There was no second chance for this mission, nor was there a chance to pursue others in progress because of several arrests.

In Captivity

My recollection is that the day was December 14, Thursday morning, as I began to work at my desk, when two men in civilian clothes entered my office while a third one stayed at the door. I guessed their business as my eyes surveyed the three figures: one wrestler-framed, one girlish-faced and one lanky. The wrestler moved behind my chair while the girlish-faced said, "We are looking for Mr. Horváth." Pretending absent-minded shuffling of account vouchers, I attempted to bury my coded notebook. "We want that," he continued in a steely voice while flashing an identification card, "and you come with us." The wrestler pushed a gun against my shoulder blade and with his chest shoved me toward the room's centre. They tied my hands tightly and led me to the street where I was ushered into a limousine marked, "Voluntary Ambulance Association of Budapest." A resourceful decoy, I thought while I was being rushed inconspicuously through the avenues of Buda into the yard of the Military Prison on Margit Boulevard.

Immediately I was led into a large room where each of the three men took note pads and pencils into their hands. The wrestler said, "You talk; we write." As I remained silent they looked at me and at each other with apparent surprise. When I continued with silence the girlish-face stepped toward me and said in a flat tone, "Mr. Horváth, you got nabbed. Your friends are arrested also. Almost the whole crazy group got caught. We need you to piece together all the details. Realize it; you made mistakes of judgment and you became involved in a deadly, grave underground conspiracy. You assist us so that we can help you. Think for a few minutes. We will leave you here alone." All three left the room and then came back parading before me two fellow students. The episodes were intended to prod me to talk. By now all three argued that I should talk. Indeed, having seen

two of my friends in captivity, I felt that it would not be a viable strategy to remain speechless. I remembered a scenario rehearsed a few times during the previous weeks: the rational behaviour should be to devise a scaled-down story made up of events, places and persons obviously known already to the interrogators. Notwithstanding the risk involved in their discovering my scheme and therefore retaliating with harsh treatment, still this appeared to be the logical attitude when loyalty and self-preservation complement one another.

Soon it turned out that my captors were in a hurry. They escalated the process of interrogation by resorting to a whole gamut of physical and psychological cruelties during the subsequent days....* I surmised from the thrust of the inquiry that my interrogators' prime target was to capture more of our fellow students still at large. They kept throwing names at me; with some I was in direct underground operation, others were part of our movement, still others I had met in the past but had no current operational ties with, some were persons I had only heard about, and finally, some were wholly unfamiliar individuals. Within the student movement Emil Májsay, Vilmos Fitos and Antal Gyénes were the main targets. Within the higher political sphere they scrambled the names of Zoltán Tildy, Béla Varga, Ferenc Nagy, Pál Auer, Vince Vörös, Imre Kovács, Gyula Dessewffy and others. Three questions dominated this wrangle: (1) When did I see him? (2) When will I meet him next? (3) Where was he at this time? So they were on a fishing expedition, I inferred, and risked dodging as many questions as I felt possible. Apparently, they were frustrated with my lengthy stories....

Shortly I was back in the interrogation room. Again Lajos Fehér, Vilmos Fitos and Emil Májsay were the targets of inquiry. I claimed that I was scheduled to meet Májsay that week one afternoon on the Kálvin Square, but could not remember the exact day and hour without deciphering my pocket calendar. They produced my calendar pages for the week, and I pretended that a disguised entry on the day after tomorrow, Saturday

* Editor's note: Many personal details of Horváth's interrogation have been omitted.

afternoon at two o'clock, was a coded reminder to meet Májsay. Whether the gamble worked or the captors needed a rest, I was led to the prison building.

Cell 105 of the Military Prison was a large room at the northeast end of the third floor. In two lines on straw sacks there were about 25 men lying. My escort meditatively assigned a cot to me around the middle of the left side row.... I awoke with a sharp pain in my feet and head. It was daylight and my roommates told me that I missed the breakfast because I did not respond either to words or shaking.

As I recall this was the morning when Gyula Szentadorjány was added to the cell's population. The interrogation resumed just before noon and lasted until evening. For a change there was no beating.... They took me into a group meeting with the three inquirers, occasionally with only one of them. Repeatedly there were other people in the room behind me, but I was forced to look into a bright fluorescent light. The questioning added up to a potpourri of everything: the review of hundreds of photographs, how could religious people talk with communists, who was Jewish or communist in the student resistance, who were communists in the Peasant Federation; have Zoltán Mikó, István Tóth and Vilmos Bondor visited the Nostra office, how to locate Tibor Hám, István Csicsery-Rónay, Péter Veres, Pál Fábry, Gyula Totka; what did I know about the disguised ambulance limousine, etc. Whenever in talking I mentioned the name of Count Pál Teleki, the former Prime Minister and boy scout idol, they showed irritation. Next morning I was shaved, given a bigger pair of shoes and even my torn winter coat got mending. Repeatedly they rehearsed with me the anticipated *rendezvous* with Emil Májsay. I went through the motions with mixed feelings because in truth there existed no arrangement with Májsay. The decoy ambulance limousine took us to the Kálvin Square; four persons sat with me and they pointed at another civilian automobile in escort. They impressed me with the loaded guns in their pockets so that I should not think of any careless move while awaiting Májsay on the street. After 25 minutes of waiting, I was led back to the limousine and the caravan returned to the prison.

Their disappointment was not disguised. While riding in the limousine they gave me the ultimatum: "Lead us to the hiding place of Májsay if you want to save your skin!" I did not know his

hideout and noted that he must have learned about the arrest of all his colleagues, so he obviously disappeared. I even complimented their remarkable skill in catching all of us. Presently their furour was poured on me....

In cell 105 the evening of December 24, Christmas Eve, was the ending of another routine day. We could hear from the constant coming and going in the building that the investigating squads did not slow down; they wanted to wind up the case of the student underground movement. The news spread that they will take no holiday recess; the first day of Christmas they write the indictments, the second day the martial court will pronounce the sentences, and a minimum of three persons will be executed immediately—Sándor Kiss, Tibor Zimányi and myself—yet the number may go up to six. By midnight the place quieted down, but not for long; and then the approaching gunfire could be heard. These were the hours when the Soviet Army encircled Budapest and among other advances one tank unit reached Széna Square, about one kilometer from our prison. The next morning all the prisoners—about 80 persons—were led to a courtyard and one-by-one ushered into waiting buses. My name was read off among my colleagues' by the sergeant-major. Indeed, these were the short minutes when I saw my four captors in gendarme uniforms with sickle feather at the cap, each also displaying the Arrow-Cross ensign.

Swiftly the bus convoy started to move but instead of travelling the highway toward Germany, they approached the Pest District Prison on Main Street. This had been for months the German Gestapo prison. Immediately after registration, German officers with swastika arm bands began to deal with our case. Within hours I was taken to an SS Captain who quickly perused the documents on his desk and apparently noticed the name of Nostra Warehouse Corporation and inquired about my role in the arrangements at the Gyáli Street depot for the Swedish Red Cross and other international agencies. Obviously, he had been investigating something about that because in short intervals two men and a woman prisoner were brought in testing if we knew each other. To this SS Captain I explained in a professional manner the procedures a warehouse employs in dealing with clients in general and regarding the Red Cross consignments in particular. After about an hour of inquiry, suddenly the telephone rang and the Captain must have received a call from a

higher authority because he stood up and clicked heels. Within seconds he rushed out of the room in overcoat, and after another hour one of his deputies took me back to a prison cell. In this room there were several people; among them two French prisoners of war, one Polish officer and Count Miklós Eszterházy, a member of the Upper House of Hungarian Parliament.

Our stay in the Main Street Prison turned out to be brief because in a few days we were transferred into the basement of the Parliament building. Instead of automobile transportation, we were lined up in pairs to walk, guarded on both sides by German SS soldiers. Several episodes of this march have been inscribed in my memory. The incentive to cross the bridge fast was obvious because of the scattered artillery fire. Yet the trudging column could move only as fast as some of the prisoners could drag themselves. On the bridge pavement there were dead bodies, defunct vehicles and bomb craters. My wretched feet could hardly carry me, so my colleagues offered assistance. One memorable assistance was offered in the form of a walking stick by István Kemény, a medical student, who had permission to keep it due to a lame leg. Dragging on with the column was a must because of the familiar rule: whoever held up the process or fell out of line could be shot on the spot. Leaning on the borrowed cane and limping in stride, suddenly the end of my stick got stuck in an ice cleft. It did not yield and as I tried with a jerk to free it, the handle separated from the stick and there was in my hand a two-foot long dagger. A terrifying experience: could the Gestapo guards miss noticing the event and had they any alternative but to shoot the holder of the dagger? Perhaps the lifesavers were those two artillery mines that exploded on our half of the bridge at this very second. The guards shouted, "Take cover! Lie down!" Everybody did; guards and guarded ones shared a divine community of interest for a few seconds. In this melee I managed to free the butt of the walking stick so as to re-assemble it with the handle. My miraculous survival here became fatally accentuated only a few seconds later, when a member of our column slipped into a bomb crater to disappear into the icy Danube River. After another trying half an hour we were herded into the Parliament building to be kept there in the basement of the Upper House for about ten days.

The German Gestapo unit guarding us was commanded by a reserve officer Captain, a medical doctor in civilian life. He kept

shouting with a high-pitched voice and accused Hungarians of being ungrateful to the Germans; his oratory usually ended with hailing Hitler, and predictions of final German victory. His unit was charged with investigation as well as with meting out sentences. There was some investigation because there were delays during which certain contacts with the outside world evolved. A few persons received medicine, blankets and food from outside. I was the beneficiary of all these goods brought by the Reverend András Hamza. His courage was quietly appreciated by those of us who knew his prominent role in the preparation of the fake Szálasi manifesto and in other projects. During our stay in the basement of the Parliament building, we recovered somewhat from the tortures at the Military Prison. The twelve students of the Independence Movement were able to exchange words. These twelve were: Sándor Kiss, Tibor Zimányi, Pál Jonás, Zoltán Nyeste, István B. Rácz, Lajos Imre, István Fiam, István Kristó-Nagy, Miklós Takácsi, Ernő Bálint, Ottó Elek and myself. Also, István Kemény allied himself with us during those concluding weeks, even though his arrest was due to activities separate from ours. During these days we could pull together for meditation over the Bible and the quiet singing of psalms, usually around Sándor Kiss. Poetry became another source of sustenance with contributions from everyone and marathon recitals of Ady by Rácz.

Starting around January 10, 1945, there followed several transfers in succession. From the Parliament we were taken to the City Hall where the officials claimed unpreparedness for accepting us. During the negotiations we were held in a corridor when one of our group, István Kristó-Nagy, disappeared. Upon discovering the escape, our guards furiously threatened to decimate us in retaliation, and we were already lined up when a higher-ranking officer reappeared with orders to transport the group. Next, we arrived at the Arrow-Cross National Headquarters at Andrásy Street 60. Here our stay lasted one night. Our next stay was at the Gestapo Headquarters in the Buda Castle. The discipline was strict, and it was felt that the highest ranking security officers of the besieged city might deal with us summarily; but fortunately, they had only blurred vision of our identity and were busy interrogating prisoners of war just captured on the front line. During the whole night we were seated on chairs shivering under the broken windows. The next

morning we were loaded on four trucks. While speeding through the district of Tabán, our convoy was attacked by airplanes spreading machine-gun volleys. The driver halted the trucks; the guards ran into the buildings and the prisoners followed. Here, instead of seeking shelter in the basement, I ran up to the second floor, but could not devise a reasonably safe escape. However, it happened that on this occasion Jonás, Zimányi and Rác successfully hid in a basement to find their escape. The trucks crossed the bridge to Pest to continue driving northward until another air attack compelled stoppage at the Kossuth Lajos Square. Again everyone tried to find hiding. Running, I just reached the wall of the Parliament building when a volley of bullets swept the pavement only inches before my shoes. Soon we were in the Markó Street Prison, where the warden, seeking instruction from the Ministry of Justice, was referred to the district Arrow-Cross Headquarters.

Soon an Arrow-Cross brigade came to escort us to their headquarters at 2 Szent István Boulevard. By now I gambled my defense on the hope that the investigation papers might have been delayed somewhere in the transfers and therefore I could invent a story of lesser crime or even a simple bureaucratic bungle. But the style of the crew dispelled any illusions. They displayed the most menacing blend of dilettantism, uninhibitedness and self-conceit. They appeared and sounded just as fearful as their reputation while ordering us to march in single line. They kept talking. A very young man at my side holding a submachine gun explained that it took only less than one inch turn of the disc to finish a case and that it was their responsibility to perform all functions of emergency governing. Upon arrival at their headquarters, we were immediately subjected to a screening in the courtyard. One of the staffers—scrutinizing the slope of my forehead and my curly raven black beard—speculated that I was a Jew, and he dropped the hypothesis only after further anatomical inquiry. Then I countered claiming that they ought to send me back to my job at Nostra, a business corporation charged with such vital things as rationing grain supply. Further, I claimed that I was in captivity only because of an incompetent sentry who detained me when one particular identification document remained accidentally in the pocket of another jacket. Soon we were all led to the basement where not much later a small group of us were ordered to stand in the light of an electric

bulb to be viewed by a higher official. This man wore the soldier's uniform, but without insignia. Looking us over, occasionally holding a flashlight into the subject's face, he demanded quick answers. Suddenly, he spotted a grey-haired man and after prodding him to say something, the fatal recognition followed: "I know you. I remember that eight years ago I spoke about National Socialism in Csepel and you ridiculed my speech. You caused the audience to laugh at me. Now you will admit that I was right." This was the interrogation as well as the sentence. The few of us there, including his son, saw him dragged out. He was killed on the Danube bank instantly as the news spread a few weeks later....

The next day I was among forty men taken by guards to the Vörösmarty Street School of the Scottish Mission, which this time was a station of the punitive platoons. We were summoned to join the fight; the ones excelling and surviving would be forgiven, but any sign of hesitation or speculation would be punished with instant death. In the school's auditorium there were about 150 men guarded by Arrow-Cross troopers. In scheming to learn more about the place and conditions I grabbed two buckets and asked a guard to take me to the water tap. He guided me into the basement where after two turns along the semi-dark corridors we spotted the building's only functioning water tap. Having returned with the full buckets and distributed the contents, I set out to repeat the journey alone. At the tap while I was filling the bucket there appeared from around the corner a man with a bucket in his hand. Suddenly I had to rub my eyes. Wrapped in lilac-coloured morning gown there stood Gyula Gombos. A writer himself in the underground movement and fully aware of my predicament, yet at this instant he could hardly decide what was more surprising—that I was alive, or that I was next to him. Quickly he signalled to follow him toward escape. I answered that I wanted to go back for Sándor Kiss, and I hoped to return within a few minutes. So I went back for Sándor, and we met Gyula who led us through an elaborate labyrinth into a remote part of the basement. There in a good-sized family quarter, we were most warmly embraced by other friends: Zoltán Tildy, Albert Bereczky, Viktor Csolnoky, Zoltán Tildy, Jr., and László Tildy. The secluded air-raid shelter household included the wives and other family members. Indeed, the most hunted leader of the Hungarian Independence Movement, Zoltán Tildy—who

became Prime Minister in 1945, President of the Republic during 1946-48, a leader in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—this time was hiding here under the assumed name of Lajos Nagy, a land surveyor from Transylvania who had actually died a few weeks before.

There was no time to celebrate our escape but only to exchange vital information. It was obvious that we two newcomers had to be whisked out of this place immediately. Shortly, Sándor and I were fed, shaved, clothed for departure. The two Reformed Church ministers, Tildy and Bereczky, lent their clerical dark suits and ecclesiastical mantles to us so that we could walk through the streets pretending to bury the dead of the war. We walked to the Thanksgiving Reformed Church at 58 Pozsony Street where friends—Mihály Hogye, Jolán Tildy and others—sheltered us through three more days until the Russians finally cleared that particular part of Budapest of Germans. In the meanwhile, contemplating the danger of discovery by Arrow-Cross search troopers, we opted for an alternative risk. One might regard it as an application of risk minimization calculus. Even though the tower was riddled with holes from repeated artillery strikes, we chose to await freedom inside a battered nook of the church tower.

Postscript

During the subsequent months, I learned that the twelve members of the Free Life Student Movement survived the last days of Nazi German rule in Hungary. Beginning with early 1945 I observed these people in public life. When the next wave of regimentation hit Hungary, this time sponsored by the imperial overlord Stalin and perpetrated by his domestic viceroy Rákosi, then, alas, the survival rate worsened.* When the Revolution of 1956 shook Hungary and surprised the world, most of us were still there attempting to revive the 1944 platform, namely, representative government, progressive reforms and national independence. Subsequently, almost as an afterthought, several of us tried to preserve the Revolution's real spirit in exile.

* Out of twelve persons, seven were imprisoned for years.

The fact that I myself survived the turn of 1944 into 1945 could be thought of differently according to the commentator's predilection: either as a random event with very low probability, or as the Almighty God's loving care. Documents in archives subsequently revealed that the Court of National Reckoning had condemned me to death and that only the unexpected encirclement of Budapest by Russian forces prevented it from carrying out the order. The court-martial prosecutor's role went to Bálint Balassa, Juris Doctor, a senior lieutenant of the gendarmerie. My "execution" was reported throughout the German-occupied regions of Hungary. But unexpectedly, Christmas night my would-be executioners were ordered to the front line and soon after they became part of the élite contingent which fought its way out of besieged Budapest. Additional ironies might be noted at this point. A year later, when Balassa was on trial with his companions, it became public knowledge that his taste for debonaire dressing was complemented with other refined attributes, such as being an accomplished piano player. I neither went to his trial nor gave testimony. He was sentenced to death, but the Head of the State, President Zoltán Tildy, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment in response to pleas from Mrs. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, the widow of the nation's highest martyr, and from Cardinal József Mindszenty who, as Bishop of Veszprém had been detained by Balassa in January 1945. At the request of these two persons, I also signed the recommendation for clemency. Three years later a new trial was scheduled and he was executed. In the meanwhile, however, I had met Balassa as a fellow inmate while the Stalinists held me in prison. During those months, at one of the recurrent shuffling of inmates, he and I were temporarily in the same cell where we carried on a conversation. I was quite conscious of how moral indignation inside me became subdued by contemplative curiosity.

The Hungarian Independence Movement received national and international recognition during 1945. The student resistance movement was highly praised and I, among others, received prestigious awards. On occasions, these awards were further accentuated by recognition from the Allied Control Commission, specifically by the three generals who represented the Soviet Union, the United States of America and Great Britain respectively. Certain events were specially noted, among others my presence at two receptions given by Marshal Voroshilov, who

was the Chairman of the Allied Control Commission in Hungary. Thus according to the inherent dynamics of those times, I was drafted into public life. The political parties of the governing coalition competed for identification with the surviving members of the national resistance movement. I joined the Independent Smallholder Party and working through it, I was elected Member of Parliament and Member of the Budapest Municipal Council. There followed appointments to several advisory, policy-making and executive positions both in the private and public sectors. Indeed, it appears quite difficult to simply summarize this period without running the risk of overstating or understating the process. Let the generalization suffice here that I was involved in economic policy-making, I sponsored a major piece of legislation in Parliament, yet my primary task was to work on a daily basis with Sándor Kiss as Deputy Director at the Hungarian Peasant Federation.

As I look back on the content of this essay, I can think of no more dignified stopping point than to write down that the most important and most meaningful experience of all my working life has been the opportunity to work at the side of Kiss. Because my own participation in the student movement was intertwined with the personality of Kiss, I know that my behaviour and activities were rooted in our friendship. In fact, much beyond the time period recollected here, the two of us maintained and enjoyed through 39 years, until his death in 1982, an unparalleled friendship of warmth, trust and partnership. I never doubted his leadership and he never doubted my loyalty. The very opportunity to work with him amounted to the highest reward I could ever attain.