

DOCUMENTS ON LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY

Introduced, edited, and translated (where necessary) by
Oliver Botar Jr.

1. Moholy-Nagy and the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy: Documents

a. Introduction

It is not a very well-known fact that during the war, László Moholy-Nagy expressed his continued interest in his homeland (as well as in his youthful political affiliations) by taking on the presidency of the Chicago Chapter of the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy,¹ a Leftist organization with allegedly Communist connections. We present here an interview with Zita Schwarcz, a former member of that Council; an exchange of correspondence between Moholy-Nagy and William Benton, Assistant Secretary of State of the United States in 1946; and a translation of the Council's remembrance of Moholy-Nagy in its newsletter.

In 1946, when trying to facilitate the process of his and his wife's naturalization as U.S. citizens, Moholy-Nagy downplayed his role in the Council, as well as the (Leftist) political affiliations of his youth. His daughter, Hattula Moholy-Nagy, remembers that shortly after her father sent Benton this letter, both he and his wife received their naturalization papers. She also remembers her father's energetic (and exhausting) efforts to support the Council and its candidate for a post-war Hungarian leader, Count Michael Károlyi. While Zita Schwarcz remembers these efforts as being largely an expression of Moholy-Nagy's loyalty to Károlyi, his daughter remembers them as an expression of her father's interest in the future of his homeland.² In her biography of Moholy-Nagy, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy remembers these activities thus:

[...] During the war years there were long meetings with the local Office of Civilian Defense, hearings on draft defer-

ments, and weekly sessions with the American Federation of Democratic Hungarians (*sic*).

This group was a curious assembly of doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, artisans, and workmen, who had no more in common than their Hungarian nationality and their devotion to Moholy. Driven by the same nostalgic loyalty which had seemed so ridiculous to him in his friend Eisenstein ten years earlier, Moholy tried to 'form a permanent organization to work for the defeat of Hitler and the liberation of Hungarians from despotic rule, and to assist in the undercover democratic movement in Hungary.' It was the ultimate aim of this group to establish Count Michael Karolyi (*sic*), Hungarian land reformer and exile, as Prime Minister of a democratic Hungarian government. Moholy spoke before steel-mill workers in Gary and coal miners in Pennsylvania; he sat through endless amateur shows which are the peculiar obsession of all foreign language groups; he went to Washington to enlist support of Eleanor Roosevelt for the cause; and he spent hours on the telephone, trying to pacify the fiercely individualistic tempers of his followers.³

It is thus not surprising to find that after the war, Moholy-Nagy was also active as president of the Amerikai Magyar Roosevelt Bizottság (American-Hungarian Roosevelt Committee), an organization seeking to promote the re-election of F. D. Roosevelt as American President among Hungarian-Americans.⁴

A particularly intriguing bit of information in the memorial piece published in the newsletter of the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy is the "Moholy Nagy László Segélyalap" [László Moholy-Nagy Aid Fund] apparently administered by the Academy of Applied Arts in Budapest after Moholy-Nagy's death in November of 1946. It is likely that this Fund was Moholy-Nagy's own idea, as expressed in his will. While it is also likely that the Fund was liquidated along with all other foundations in Hungary after the Stalinists came to power in 1948, it would be a timely task to find out what happened to it, now that Foundations are once again legal in Hungary.

It is hoped that these documents will shed light on a little-known aspect of Moholy-Nagy's biography, and on what we know about his commitment to the future of his homeland.

Notes

1. The Hungarian-American Council for Democracy was founded in 1943, with Count Michael Károlyi as its honorary president, and actor Bela Lugosi as its acting president. Sándor Szilási, "Az amerikai magyarság a II. világháborúban" [American-Hungarians in the Second World War]. *Új Látóhatár* 1979, no. 2–3 as quoted in Miklós Szántó. *Magyarok Amerikában* [Hungarians in America] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), pp. 87–88.
2. Verbal communication with Hattula Moholy-Nagy, 1988. This interest in his homeland—indeed longing for contact with Hungarians—was also expressed in his friendship with his Hungarian-American carpenter, Kalman Toman (*sic*), as reported by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. *Experiment in Totality*, Second Edition (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1969) pp. 237, 239.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
4. "Kiáltvány Chicago és környéke Magyarorsághoz!" (*sic*) [Manifesto to the Hungarians of Chicago and District] (Undated flyer [1946?]). Courtesy of Zita Schwarcz.

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- b. Excerpts from an interview conducted with Zita Schwarcz on László Moholy-Nagy (Hamilton, Ontario, 22 May 1988; by Oliver Botar Jr.)

Biographical Note: Zita Schwarcz was born Zita Strauss in Budapest, married a man from Chicago, and came with him to that city in 1932. Around 1944–46 she worked for the Hungarian-American Democratic Council as "Chairman of Entertainment." Her husband died in 1967, and she moved to Hamilton, Ontario in 1986.

Botar: When and how did you meet Moholy-Nagy?

Schwarcz: Moholy-Nagy I met right after the war. At that time, Hungarian Liberals, or so-called Liberals, decided to form an organization that would enhance the possibility of having a democratic Hungary, since all of them left Hungary because of Fascism... They decided to form the Hungarian-American Democratic Council. They asked Moholy to head this organization since he was the biggest name that they could find. Since Moholy was interested in Count Károlyi—who lived in London—and with whom he was in correspondence, he accepted. Also, Moholy was a humanitarian; I would say today he was an ethical Humanist... He really believed that there could be a democratic Hungary, and there will be real elections, and that there would be a kind of government where he could go back, and be an accepted person... I think he did it for Károlyi's sake. I know that he read us the letters he got from Károlyi

at every meeting; he was in constant touch with him... Since he was at that time at his Institute of Design... we held our meetings in his Institute...

Q: Do you remember exactly when this was?

Schwarz: This must have been at the end of 1944 or the beginning of 1945... George Striker was really the godfather of the Hungarian-American Democratic Council. He and his wife Barbara were very active and worked very hard to establish it. Unbeknownst to me, [Striker] had intended to go back to Hungary eventually, and he wanted to show the Hungarian government what he did for Hungary... Moholy was very active in [the Hungarian-American Democratic Council]. There were about four or five others on the committee who were very active... I remember Dr. Tibor Rónyi, Dr. John Perl, George Striker, Béla Ruik (a Communist), Tomolicka, André Gábor (a Liberal), and myself... While Moholy did not actually draft the letters, it was he who signed them, and he came to all the meetings in the Institute—at least he was there every time that I was... I remember, however, that on one occasion I had organized a banquet, and Moholy was supposed to have been the speaker. Oszkár Jászi... and Rusztem Vámbéry were also there.¹ Anyway, Moholy could not make it, and I was absolutely hysterical because I was the entertainment chairman. So Moholy sent George Kepes,² who did not speak, but he had a beautiful voice so he read poetry. Anyway Oszkár Jászi and Vámbéry spoke. But then slowly [the HADC] got out of his hands, after about a year or a year-and-a-half, and he began to realize that he is not going to succeed in getting Károlyi back to Hungary to head the Hungarian government. Also, despite the fact that I did not have any conversations with him about this, I do assume now based on my present knowledge of the history of the Council—that he came to realize that it had been backed by the Communists, and I do not think he liked that, and he did resign. In fact he had a man working for him who was a Communist by the name of Tomolicka... who had been on the Council... and who [eventually] went back to Hungary. He worked for Moholy in the Institute, he was a carpenter, in fact a very good carpenter... He made the first inner spring out of wood [after Moholy's or another member of the School's design]...³ Anyway, we [i.e. the Council] had a farewell dinner for Moholy, and very shortly afterwards I heard that he was sick. That was already when he was in the new school on Dearborn Street.

1. Oszkár Jászi was a sociologist particularly concerned with the minorities of historical Hungary. He, as well as the lawyer Ruzstem Vámbéry, took part in Károlyi's short-lived Hungarian government of 1918-19.
2. György (George) Kepes (Selyp, Hungary 1906), painter, photographer, designer, teacher, editor. Belonged to Lajos Kassák's Budapest "Munka Circle" in the late 20s. After 1929, he worked with Moholy-Nagy in Berlin. Eventually, Moholy-Nagy invited him to teach at his Chicago Institute of Design. He later became professor of Visual Design at M.I.T., founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies there, and edited the influential "Vision + Value Series" of books.
3. It is almost certain that this Tomolicka is identical with the carpenter "Kalman Toman" mentioned by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy in her biography. (See note 2. in Introduction "a." above)

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c. Correspondence Between László Moholy-Nagy and William Benton

(László Moholy-Nagy to William Benton)

February 14, 1946

Mr. William Benton
 Assistant Secretary of State
 State Department
 Washington D.C.

Dear Mr. Benton:

I remember with great pleasure the luncheon I had with you and Mr. Fisher at my arrival in this country in 1937, and our subsequent meetings during your work at the University of Chicago. At that time you made me feel that my ideas on art and education which I had come to teach in this country were well received by you; and I therefore hope you will understand why I turn to you in the following matter.

Though I am now almost nine years in this country my own and my wife's application (*sic*) for citizenship are being handled to say the least with a baffling slowness. The immigration authorities here in Chicago have stated repeatedly that the "FBI (*sic*) investigation has not yet been completed, and that we can not be granted citizenship before this has been done. Why I should be investigated by the FBI I do not know. Trying to find possible reasons I have come to the conclusion that my connection with the Democratic American-Hungarian Council (*sic*) might be under scrutiny. If this is the case it can be easily explained.

As an artist I never had any political affiliations. But when I was asked as a non-political educator to help unite the Hungarians in America for the Allied cause and the necessary war efforts, I felt it to be my duty to accept in spite of my many other obligations and the heavy work entailed. As soon as the war ended I terminated my connections with the Democratic American-Hungarian Council.

Whatever the causes for the delay may be, I feel rather humiliated by the handling of my case, and by the strange attitude of the Immigration authorities who have never felt it necessary to inform me about their objections. My life and work here and abroad have been always open to public opinion through my own publications, write-ups, exhibitions, and my activities as president of the Institute of Design in Chicago. When I was asked to come to this country I had to decide to come for good, and I did my best to contribute all my abilities to its civilization. This makes the treatment meted out to me by the Immigration authorities so particularly strange.

I am enclosing some of the very recent publications dealing with my work. You might also have seen the article on me in the current issue of TIME magazine (art section). A large volume "Vision in Motion", largely concerned with the educational aspects of modern art, is now in print.

I would be most grateful if you as the guardian of cultural affairs in the State Department could lend me a helping hand.

With kind regards,
Yours very sincerely

L. Moholy-Nagy

PS:

The filing numbers of our applications for citizenship are:

730p-271929 Moholy-Nagy

730p-278661 Dorothy Pauline Sibyl Moholy-Nagy

mn/sp
encl.

* * * *

(William Benton to László Moholy-Nagy)

Assistant Secretary of State
Washington

April 20, 1946.

Dear Mr. Moholy-Nagy:

If I've been of small help - I'm most happy.

Very sincerely yours,

William Benton

Mr. L. Moholy-Nagy,
2622 Lakeview Avenue
Chicago, Illinois.

(The letters are published through the courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy)

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d. Excerpt from the Newsletter of 25 November 1946 of The
Chicago Chapter, Hungarian-American Council for Democracy
[In Hungarian]

To our Members and Friends:

A great loss has been suffered by the Chicago Hungarian family, news of it has probably already reached all of you. It is with a heavy heart that we inform you that memorial services for our beloved former president *László Moholy-Nagy* will be held on

Wednesday 27 November 1946, at 2:30 P.M. At the Institute of Design, founded by him (632 North Dearborn Street)

While we ask all of you to attend the memorial service, we also wish to inform you that the interment will be a private, family affair. Those who wish to make donations (in lieu of flowers) to charities dear to our beloved deceased's heart, should send their contributions to *the aid of orphans in Hungary*, or to the "László Moholy-Nagy Aid Fund" at the *Academy of Applied Arts* in Budapest.

The Chicago Chapter of the Hungarian-American
Democratic Council

György Striker, secretary

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Text of our press release sent to the Hungarian-language press:

It is with heavy hearts that we remember in these few lines, our founding member and first president, László Moholy-Nagy, who was finally pulled from our ranks by a lengthy, incurable illness on Sunday, 24 November 1946.

It was the Hungarian conscience of László Moholy-Nagy, our beloved president, that thrust him in 1943 into the public arena, so that he could take into his care the good name and honour of his people, during times when guilty hands had led them on a nearly fatal path.

As one of the founders of the Hungarian-American Democratic Council, and as its local president, he forged together, with untiring energy, the leading figures of Chicago's progressive Hungarian community, and rallied them to the support of the ideal of a labouring, new free people's democratic Hungary, as well as to the support of our great president F. D. Roosevelt. We have his constructive will—suffused with his artistic temperament—to thank for the success of our efforts.

His memory will keep alive in us László Moholy-Nagy's tireless efforts to build a new and better world.

THE CHICAGO CHAPTER OF THE HUNGARIAN-AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL

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Sympathy telegram sent to László Moholy-Nagy's widow: [in English]

HE WAS OUR GUIDE AT THE OUTSET, OUR SHEP-
HARD (*sic*) AS WE CARRIED ON THE INTEGRITY
AND WISDOM OF HIS LEADERSHIP, HIS BOUND-
LESS DEVOTION TO TRUTH AND BEAUTY HAVE
SET EVERLASTING NORMS FOR OUR ACTIVITIES.
HE LIVES ON AMONG US AS HE DOES IN HIS ART
AND HIS FAMILY.

CHICAGO CHAPTER, HUNG. AMER. COUNCIL FOR
DEMOCRACY

(Material provided courtesy of Zita Schwarcz)