

Reflections on the Revolutionary Activities of László Iván Kovács¹

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ABSTRACT

László Iván Kovács, commander of Corvin passage between 25th of October of 1956 and 1st of November and then second-in-command until 4th of November, was one of the legendary figures of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. He proved to be an able commander, who did not forget humanity even while fighting. He transferred wounded Soviet soldiers to the Soviet Headquarters. He forbade arbitrary punishment even against suspected of being members of the ÁVH.² He wanted to preserve the purity of the revolution. He consistently stood up for the independence of Hungary, for a multi-party political system, for free elections and for the removal of Soviet troops he was willing to accept the government of Imre Nagy until the next elections. László Iván Kovács's activities after the 4th of November were perhaps as significant during the revolution of 1956. During the revolution, he planned to rescue the Minister of Defence, Pál Maléter. László Iván Kovács founded the Turul party. He planned to establish a new revolutionary national army. He embraced the idea of Hungary as a democracy based on an independent and multi-party political system. These ideas weighed as heavily in the eyes of his interrogators and judges as his armed activities during the revolution. He set an example both during and after the struggle. His execution made him a martyr of the revolution.

KEYWORDS: Communism, Corvin passage, Hungarian revolution of 1956, László Iván Kovács

1 This study has previously been published in Hungarian without notes and in a slightly shorter form in the historical journal *Rubicon* in 10–11 of 2016. Galambos 2016.

2 State Protection Authority (Hungarian abbreviation: ÁVH): political police under the control of the Communist Party, which used terror to keep society in fear. In 1953, the political police was stripped of their autonomy and merged into the Ministries of the Interior, but society was unaware of this.

Introduction – Resources and methods of research

During the Second World War, Hungary – like the Bulgarian, Romanian, Polish and Czech territories – came under the occupation of the Soviet forces. According to Stalin, because of the “changed nature of war”, the military occupation was expected to be permanent and the Soviet social system³ had to be adopted, although the Hungarian society may not have been aware of Stalin’s opinion. From 1945 until June 19th of 1991, Hungary was under the military occupation of the Soviet Union, although initially most people, including the leaders of the democratic civil parties, believed that the occupation was only temporary, and would last until the peace treaty ending World War II. With the Soviet occupation and the gradual establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship, all the tensions and social discontent began to accumulate, which eventually led to the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. In order to cooperate with the United States of America – the Soviet Union tried to preserve the semblance of democracy in Hungary, until 1947⁴, but with the help of the Soviet intervention, the communists obtained and firmly held the key areas of state power. Politicians and thinkers, who opposed the communists, were arrested and convicted in Soviet-style concept trials. The political police also organized on the Soviet model and of course under communist control, took their victims daily and raised the terror to state level.⁵ The 1947 peace treaty left Hungary under Soviet occupation, officially in order to provide the Soviet Union with a staging ground towards Austria, which was jointly occupied by the Allies. The Soviets no longer needed to maintain the pretence of democracy in Hungary, so the communists soon liquidated other parties and installed a Bolshevik-type dictatorship, which had to be called ‘people’s democracy’. The propaganda promoted by the state party differed sharply from reality, until 1956, detention without conviction, internment, concept trials and other forms of state terror already affected one third of Hungarian families.⁶ Hungarian society only slowly realized that its basic values, such as the freedom of the nation and the individual, the free exercise of faith and private property, were under threat at both national and individual level.⁷ A Bolshevik dictatorship eerily similar to Stalin’s was established in the country, under the leadership of party secretary general Mátyás Rákosi. In 1953, when it seemed that with the death of Stalin, the grip of the dictatorship might ease somewhat Imre Nagy became prime minister of Hungary, at the behest of the Soviets, who announced the ‘New Course’ policy. However, in the spring of 1955, Imre Nagy was forced to step down, and the political leadership was reorganized.

3 Szakács – Zinner 1997, 44.

4 Okváth 1998, 24.

5 M. Kiss 2006, 45.

6 Kahler – M. Kiss 1997, 16.

7 M. Kiss 2012, 16.

At the same time, the Hungarian public began to hope more and more stubbornly, albeit without any reason, for the withdrawal of the Soviet forces, since in 1955 the official reason for the military occupation ceased to exist with the Austrian state treaty. However, the Red Army did not plan to withdraw, but to suppress a possible anti-Soviet uprising – together with the Hungarian forces.⁸

In the summer of 1956, social discontent slowly reached a boiling point and on October 23rd the revolution broke out, which soon turned into a war of national independence due to the intervention of Soviet troops. Budapest, the Hungarian capital – although the revolution and the armed struggle spread throughout the country – was the first and symbolic location of the uprising against the Bolshevik-style dictatorship. It was in the wake of the Hungarian freedom struggle that the world's public opinion, not infrequently including left-wing politicians, writers and thinkers, recognized the true nature of communist dictatorship for the first time.⁹ During the revolution, the fiercest battles took place in the capital, mostly in its inner districts, but Corvin passage, which was a legendary revolutionary centre, also stood out among the locations of the clashes.

The most common sources of information about László Iván Kovács are the trial and investigation documents of criminal proceedings in which László Iván Kovács and his brother-in-arms were indicted. There are archival documents relating to the fighters of Corvin passage. While writing this essay, I followed the investigation dossiers of the trial of “László Iván Kovács and his associates”.¹⁰ In addition, operative dossiers of undercover agents, “Éva Kántor”¹¹ and “Erzsébet Vámos”¹² were of great help to me. In the meantime, I could not omit to provide sources on some important moments.¹³ The interrogation files of László Iván Kovács mainly focus on his revolutionary activities and political thoughts, but there are also some sporadic remarks on his family and details of his life before the revolution. While reading the trial transcripts, we must not forget the circumstances in which they were created the purpose for which they written. The main purpose of the official procedures was not to establish the truth, or to process the case in the manner

8 Horváth 2003, 45.

9 Borbándi–Molnár 1966, 245.

10 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1; ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626

11 ÁBTL 3.1.1. B-82723

12 ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-29112

13 Report of Operational Group Headquarters in 1957. In: Kahler – M. Kiss 2006, 73–92. Report of Combat Training Group Headquarters in 1957. Ibid. 64–72. Summary report of Ministry of Defence 1957. Ibid. 73–92. Report of Lieutenant General Charles Janza Deputy Minister of Defence later Minister of Defence. Ibid. 93–105. Report of major general Lajos Tóth, commander of Chief of Staff. Ibid. 106–117. Report of Serov on the activities of ranks and files of Ministries of the Interior in Szereda–Stikalin 1993, 117–119. Report of Serov on nationwide situation of Hungary ibid. 122–124. Mikoyan and Suslov: “Comrade Konev must come to Hungary immediately” ibid. 125–126. Report of Zhukov on the situation on 4th of November in 1956 ibid. 136.

prescribed bylaw and procedural rules but to justify the theses of the Communist Party and retaliate. László Iván Kovács emphasizes his own responsibility from the very beginning of the interrogations. The last sentences of his confession demands leniency towards those involved in his case. “I am repeatedly asking you that you should give lenient sentences towards those *who are implicated by me*. I have repented everything and if I were given a chance to restart my life, I would just be a forester.”¹⁴

Interrogators may have had their expectations towards the defendants and witnesses. This may be indicated by the fact that László Iván Kovács changed an important part of his confession in May. This testimony had been given two months earlier. The change was that László Iván Kovács started plotting against the Kádár government on the orders of the convoys of Major General Király. “This idea of mine was prompted by the interest that came from the interrogators in this direction.”¹⁵ This demonstrates the need for source criticism. This change may have been caused by a changed ‘conception’ during the interrogations. Another reason may have been – as László Eörsi thinks – that László Iván Kovács realised that further denial was futile.¹⁶ “During the interrogation” – as the summary report on the case of László Iván Kovács put it – “we wanted to clarify on whose orders this organisation was created. László Iván Kovács misled the investigators for a long time and he confessed to a non-existent higher leadership and admitted to recruitment, which did not happen. Later, he recanted his false testimony and admitted that he initiated and led the illegal «Turul party» in accordance with his political views.”¹⁷

László Iván Kovács’s activities were distorted by the propaganda publications of the Kádár regime. These publications were summaries of history of the period. Several memoirs did the same mistake, for example, the writings of his comrade-in-arms, Gergely Pongráz.¹⁸ Gergely Pongráz’s book was published in 1992 and in 2004. In this book, little attention was paid to László Iván Kovács, and he was portrayed in a not very favourable light.¹⁹ The most complete account of László Iván Kovács’ life and thoughts to this date is the memorial book on László Iván Kovács by László Eörsi and Tibor Filep²⁰. This book is not just an excellent summary of the life of László Iván Kovács, but also reveals his political

14 Ibid. 174. Emphasis is from me – I. G.

15 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 115. Interrogation report of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 16th of May in 1957.

16 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 88.

17 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 194. Summary report in the case of László Iván Kovács and his associates. Budapest, on the 2nd of July in 1957.

18 Anti-communist revolutionary. From November 1, he was the commander of Corvin passage. After the revolution, he emigrated abroad and returned to Hungary only after the fall of communism.

19 Pongráz 1992.

20 Eörsi–Filep 2007.

creed. This book has a wealth of sources. As the genre of the book is informative, there are no footnotes but all archival and other sources are included in the bibliography. Thus, this book is a must-have and a great help to those who are interested in the subject. Further details on the activities of László Iván Kovács during revolution can be found in the works of László Eörsi²¹, Miklós Horváth²² and the memoirs of Béla Király.²³

László Iván Kovács's fate before the revolution

László Iván Kovács was born on 18th of August in 1930 in Debrecen. He came from a military family. His father, József Iván Kovács was a non-commissioned officer of the Hungarian Royal Army, who was discharged in 1945 with his last rank of Sergeant Major.²⁴ It was not surprise that László Iván Kovács also wanted to be a soldier.²⁵ He was also interested in becoming attorney lawyer but he never had the chance. "I did not get anything from the Communist Party. I could not get a scholarship because my father was a soldier. My application was not accepted at the University of Law. I was excluded when I applied to the college of diplomacy because I was not member of the Communist Party. If I wanted to join the Communist Party, I was turned away. Our financial status was miserable."²⁶ Football was his escape route. Good football players were in demand, and they could calculate that football players were better off financially and socially than most workers. As "a football player I got used to an easier life."²⁷ His football career led him to Göd, where he was given a house and he became both football instructor and football player in Alsógöd. (He got his jobs through his playing skills, so changing football teams also meant changing jobs.²⁸) László Iván Kovács enrolled at the József Attila Free University²⁹ organised by TIT³⁰

21 Eörsi 2001; Eörsi 1997, 60–67.; Eörsi 1999, 21–28.; Eörsi 2000, 95–98.; Eörsi 1998, 44–52.

22 Horváth 2003., Horváth 1993.

23 Király 1989.

24 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 178. interrogation document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 17th of March in 1957.

25 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 84. interrogation document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 23rd of April in 1957.

26 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 152. interrogation document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 16th of March in 1957.

27 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 87. interrogation document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 23rd of April in 1957.

28 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 88. interrogation document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 23rd of April in 1957.

29 Self-education university course for adults.

30 Society for Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge.

in 1955/56, where he studied history of philosophy, music and fine art and rented a room at 1 Paulay Ede street.³¹

He read newspapers sporadically, he preferring mostly Sport³² The newspapers of the time were the mouthpieces of the Communist Party, so in most cases, only the opinion and propaganda of the Communist Party could be heard.³³ At the same time, he maintained friendly connections with university students and university officials,³⁴ who he met at the beach of Alsógöd, and discussed political issues. “I had university friends with whom we wanted a free and independent Hungary [...] I thought that *multi-party political system* is good but at least, I wished to have *two basic parties* [...] In my view, I started to fight for a *democratic system based on national foundations*. I consider myself a believer of national communism. Respect for *national traditions means equal rights with equal obligations*”.³⁵ László Iván Kovács considered himself a “national communist”, because he could not express it better, but the multi-party political system he so much desired, the democratic system based on national foundations, democracy in its entirety, was essentially outside the boundaries of the socialist regime.

The commander of Corvin passage

On the 23rd of October, when László Iván Kovács saw the march, he cried with emotion. He joined the march on Bajcsy-Zsilinszky street at 15.45. He went with law students to Bem square where the 16 points drawn up were already being read. He went to the Parliament from here. Later, then the crowd divided, he went not to the building of the Hungarian Radio but to the statue of Stalin. At the statue, they learned that the ÁVH were using tear gas grenades against the crowd, who were trying to read out their demands. He watched the statue being pulled down and afterwards he went to the radio. A committee was organised in front of the radio building, and one of the students invited him to join to them. Inside the building, the committee experienced a disorderly situation. László Iván Kovács recalled that “one of the lady comrades spoke to the Communist headquarters on the phone and

31 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 31.

32 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 75. interrogation document of József Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 1st of April in 1957.

33 This situation (press only echoes Communist views) did not change under the Kádár regime. When the Information Bureau had the key role in information policy. Csatóri 2015, 19–37.

34 With István Rulich, and János Hidas, workers of OMKER (Medical Instruments Trading Company). Also there were the Pálosi brothers. Erwin worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with Frigyes, who was an student at the University of Technology. Ibid. 76.

35 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 74–75. interrogation document of József Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 1st of April in 1957. Italics is done by me. I. G.

asked for instructions, to which allegedly comrade Apró said that if he people in front of the building did not leave the street within half an hour, they would open fire on them. This must have been around 11 or 12 o'clock. When we went back, we told the people everything and we were almost beaten up".³⁶

Afterwards, László Iván Kovács took up arms; by this time arms and ammunition were distributed in Kálvin square. That was the reason "why I took up arms, because I did not want to starve, neither did I want to see anybody starve. I did not want to get 600–800 forints as a salary. I wanted justice for everyone – real equality."³⁷ Led by a lieutenant, they entered the Hungarian National Museum through the back door and they shot at the building of the radio station all night with two machine guns and thirty carbines from the first floor window and László Iván Kovács fought with a small rifle³⁸ at this time, but it broke down and they ran out of ammunition; the siege of the building of the radio ended, so they abandoned the museum. He went home to have breakfast and then, asking a woman for a small rifle, he and about thirty others went back to the museum, where they found soldiers who disarmed them. At one o'clock in the afternoon, everyone was released and it was at this time László Iván Kovács met the commander of the mechanised infantry regiment of Piliscsaba, Lieutenant Colonel János Solymosi³⁹ and his political deputy and captain Ernő Popovics. In the afternoon László Iván Kovács walked around the Kilián barracks and in the evening he went to the Corvin cinema to look for the commander because he wanted to fight.⁴⁰

During the revolution, the fiercest fights were in the capital, especially in the inner districts. In the vicinity of Corvin passage, there were thirty-three smaller armed groups of freedom fighters, of which sixteen were classified by László Eörsi as Corvinists.⁴¹ These insurgent groups acted independently under the leadership of their own elected commanders, but there was a kind of loose cooperation among them. The armed groups led by commanders of the Corvin passage numbered around 1000–1200 by the 29th of October. Corvin passage is located on one of the busiest routes to the city centre, on the line of the boulevard Nagykörút, at the junction of Üllői road; its location was very advantageous from

36 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 152. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

37 Ibid. 152.

38 48 M 5.6 mm FÉG small rifle, a single-shot target rifle, which was used primarily for training, national defence training and sporting purposes. it was manufactured by FÉG, the Arms and Gas Machinery Factory, alias Lamp Factory.

39 Commander of the mechanized regiment in Piliscsaba, one of the corps assigned to Budapest due to the protest in Budapest.

40 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 152. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

41 Eörsi 2001, 22–23.

a combat point of view. Other advantages included a gas station nearby and a canteen in the basement of a school in Práter Street. The former was important because it provided oil for Molotov-cocktails needed to set armoured vehicles on fire and the latter for providing food to the revolutionists. According to László Iván Kovács, the activity of the armed groups led from Corvin passage basically was limited to the area between Üllői street, Nagykörút, Práter street, Nap street and Kisfaludy street.⁴²

László Iván Kovács's application for fight of was accepted by the Corvinists on 24th of October. He was given a small rifle but there was no fighting that night. At dawn of the following day, on 25th of October the commander⁴³ announced that they would give up the building of the cinema and occupy the surrounding houses. László Iván Kovács and five of his comrades were sent to reconnoitre. László Iván Kovács then went home and returned to Corvin at 11.00. By this time, he found neither the commander, nor his deputy, Szabó there. László Iván Kovács estimated the number of armed revolutionists at about fifty. At the initiation of László Iván Kovács, guard posts were assigned and 2-3 people were assigned to the windows on the first floor of the cinema.⁴⁴ The insurgents, in groups of ten to fifteen, occupied the lofts or apartments of the houses on Üllői street, while other groups sought a base of operations in the neighbouring streets. In addition to the fighters from Corvin, the insurgents from the Kilián barracks, Kisfaludy and Vajdahunyad streets coordinated their activities to a greater or lesser extent.⁴⁵ On the 25th of October, the Soviet tanks moving along the Üllői street were continuously firing at the Corvin, and several shots were fired at them from the Kilián barracks. The command was actually in the hands of László Iván Kovács, who was constantly asked for advice and began to be regarded as a commander. The next day, on 26th of October, the marching and constant firing on the Soviet tanks continued (two of them 'burned out'), to which they could only respond with small arms.

42 Horváth 2003, 118.

43 László Iván Kovács later told his interrogators that he did not remember the name of the commander, but that his deputy was László Szabó. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 152. confession document of József Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957. The name of the commander is known to the researchers although it is beyond doubt that László Iván Kovács took over the command of the Corvinists from 25th of October. Horváth 2003, 115. According to Zsuzsa Horváth, there were several commanders before László Iván Kovács. "As far as I know, a boy in a trench coat took over command, a pale-faced 29-year-old boy with blond curly hair. At first he was called Laci Miskolci, but later he was not a commander, he was a commander only for one or two days. [...] This was the situation until 27th of October; when Antoniusz Haljanics took over command from László Miskolci. Later came the news that Laci Miskolci had been shot dead, I never saw him again. At that time, Antoniusz Haljanics had a group of 30 people, with whom he went to the school on Práter Street. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-29112. 116. report of agent alias "Vámos Erzsébet". Budapest, on 21st of July in 1959."

44 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 153. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957

45 Eörsi-Filep 2007, 28.

László Iván Kovács went round the guard and asked them not to fire back, as it was just a waste of ammunition, but he was unable to achieve his aim. On this day, he met the Pongrátz brothers⁴⁶ and Zsuzsanna Horváth,⁴⁷ who worked at the wound dressing place. By this time, they had several wounded, so it became necessary to expand the dressing area.

According to László Eörsi, by this time a narrow leadership circle had tacitly been formed, who, alongside László Iván Kovács, played a significant role in management and decision-making, in effect acting as deputy commanders, which was confirmed at an impromptu meeting. These included the aforementioned Pongrátz brothers, Gergely (“Moustache”) and Ödön, Alexander Antalóczi (“Doctor”), and Tibor Bornemissza (“White Hat”)⁴⁸. On the evening of the 26th, the two medical students left, and the wounded were attended by Dr. Fáy who was living there and went down with his daughter. Gergely Pongrátz had a nervous breakdown and Attila Lehoczky (Lehotay)⁴⁹ also fell ill, but they only wanted to go to the hospital if László Iván Kovács accompanied them. He was also kept there for the night and was put to sleep, since he hadn’t slept for two days and was very exhausted.⁵⁰ All three spent the night in the Central Military Hospital. The following morning, Lehoczky offered that, if the Pongrátz brothers agreed, he would contact the government or the Soviet city command through his acquaintances in order to reach a ceasefire. The Pongrátz brothers accepted the proposal, Gergely emphasized that they would be willing to negotiate in order to end the bloodshed.⁵¹ László Iván Kovács returned to the Corvin together with Pongrátz on the morning 27th of October. By the time they reached Práter Street, their comrades – who at that time numbered around three hundred – had already destroyed two Soviet trucks, each with light cannon attached. One of the cannons was set up in front of the school on Práter Street, and the other was towed in front of the Corvin. László Iván Kovács then went through all the guard posts and assigned the shifts.⁵²

46 Gergely Pongrátz “Moustache”, Ödön Pongrátz and Kristóf Pongrátz.

47 She was a revolutionary in the Corvin Passage, who helped mostly in the kitchen and in the wound dressing room. After the revolution, László Iván Kovács fell in love with her. She joined László Ivan Kovács and his revolutionary organization. The Pest County Court sentenced him to 6 years in prison. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 218–224. NB.002/1957. 5. sentence of Pest County Court.

48 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 29.

49 László Iván Kovács mentioned the fourth year medical student, one of the doctors at Corvin passage by the name of Lehotay.

50 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 153. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

51 Horváth 1995, 111–112.

52 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 153. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

Armistice negotiations

Both the political and military leadership considered the Corvin cinema⁵³ as the centre of the armed uprising,⁵⁴ and several plans were made to liquidate it. It was decided that Corvin passage should either be shot or blown up. One of the technical corps reported that they would be able to get close to the Corvin through the large tunnel, where they would be able to carry out a huge explosion. The plan was raised already on the 25th and 26th of October. By the time Maléter reached the Kilián barracks, seven tanks had already been destroyed, one had even been captured by the insurgents and the insurgents were firing on the Soviet forces from the tank.⁵⁵ On the 26th of October, the Central Committee of the Military Council of the Hungarian Workers' Party⁵⁶ ordered the general staff to destroy Corvin with Soviet support, tanks, and airplanes could be used,⁵⁷ but Prime Minister Imre Nagy opposed the armed action, citing the expected civilian casualties. On 27th October, another plan to eliminate Corvin was drawn up, which involved the deployment of 12 Soviet tanks and 270 Hungarian soldiers.

Meanwhile, on 27th of October, Attila Lehoczky and his friend József Fedor tried to find negotiating partners for the armistice talks, and eventually stumbled upon a Soviet military patrol to whom they reported their mission, so the Soviet military patrol finally took them to the Ministry of National Defence. Lehoczky reported that László Iván Kovács was relatively the most reasonable person to talk to at Corvin. However, the majority of the insurgents fanatically believed that the fight must continue to the last drop of blood until Hungary becomes the centre of an international scandal. The population supports them with food and they have enough ammunition. The Soviet Command finally gave Lehoczky the following ultimatum: if they lay down their arms by 9.00 on the 28th of October, the insurgents will be granted a free passage.⁵⁸ On the Soviet side, the ultimatum was signed by M. Y. Kuzminov,⁵⁹ hero of the Soviet Union, and on the Hungarian side, by Captain György Benyák. The two parliamentarians, Lehoczky and Fedor – avoiding being captured by Hungarian and Soviet soldiers – returned to the Corvin at night together with

53 Eörsi 1998.

54 “According to the agents of the Ministry of the Interior, the control centre of the insurgency was located in the vicinity of the Corvin Theatre, which was the main focus of the insurgents’ resistance...” Serov’s report on the activities of the rank and file of the Ministry of the Interior on 28th of October in Szereda–Stikalín 1993, 118.

55 Report of major general Lajos Tóth, commander of Chief of Staff. Kahler – M. Kiss 2006, 116.

56 It is the name of the main decision-making body of the Hungarian Communist Party collaborating with the Soviet occupiers. Hungarian abbreviation (MDP KV).

57 Eörsi 2001, 51.

58 Horváth 1995, 112–113.

59 Kuzminov, Mikhail Yakovlevich.

Captain György Benyák and his two companions. To discuss the ultimatum and formulate the answer, the nine commanders of the Corvin passage were called together, but before deciding on the matter, the nine commanders also asked Colonel Pál Maléter for his opinion.. The colonel proposed the acceptance of the ultimatum, but surprisingly, Gergely Pongrátz, who had encouraged Lehoczky in the morning, opposed the ultimatum. In the end, the ultimatum was rejected and the terms of the surrender were set out in the reply.⁶⁰

The demands included the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country by 31st of December, the disarmament of the ÁVH⁶¹, the takeover of the armed forces by the Hungarian Armed Forces, the formation of a provisional government and free elections by the end of the year, and the reading of their demands on the Hungarian Radio, the establishment of political and economic relations with the Soviet Union based on equality, and the prosecution of the perpetrators of the bloodshed. They declared that the current government was not recognized by the insurgents and demanded that the writer Péter Veres be entrusted with the formation of the new provisional government.⁶² The document was addressed to Colonel Kuzminov and signed by Commander-in-Chief László Iván Kovács and Deputy Commanders Gergely and Ödön Pongrátz.⁶³

The conditions of the Corvinists were not considered acceptable. However, the attack, launched at eight in the morning on the 28th, failed, as the three T-34s sent reconnoitre did not return. Of the three new T-54 tanks, one was burnt out at Corvin, one returned injured and only one remained intact. Imre Nagy refused to hear of a repeat of the operation.⁶⁴ Later, at 11.00 on the 28th of October, amnesty was again offered to the insurgents in exchange for the surrender of their weapons, but no one in Corvin heard of it.⁶⁵ The communiqué was addressed to the ‘rebels of the Kilián barracks’, against which Maléter protested. At 15:03, a government order read out over the radio, announced a general ceasefire. Jubilant crowds filled the streets around Kilián on the news of the cease-fire, but later Soviet tanks reappeared and opened fire.⁶⁶

The delegates with Lieutenant Colonel János Solymosi, the commander of the mechanized regiment in Piliscsaba, went again to Corvin to negotiate, and at the joint meeting of the Corvinists commanders, they finally drafted a 12-point demand, in which the Corvinists recognized the government of Imre Nagy and set a date for free elections

60 Horváth 1995, 113.

61 The Hungarian abbreviation for the political police already operating within the Ministries of the Interior at the time, see 3. footnote.

62 Horváth 1995, 154. Original text is published by: Horváth 1995, 114.

63 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 31.

64 Eörsi 1998.

65 Eörsi 1998.

66 Horváth 1995, 115.

to be held under the supervision of the UN. This was to have taken place on the 1st of May in 1957. They also demanded that the 23rd of October should be a national holiday, that those killed in action should be declared heroes and that the agreement should be broadcast on the radio.⁶⁷ Even Solymosi considered these points to be an acceptable basis for negotiations and it was agreed that further negotiations should be conducted directly between the Ministry of National Defence, Imre Nagy and the Corvinists.⁶⁸ László Iván Kovács and Ödön Pongrácz set off to discuss the details of the surrender in the car sent by Solymosi – Staff Sergeant Tivadar Kiss remained in Corvin as a hostage – but they found no one in the parliament.⁶⁹ At the Communist Party centre on Akadémia Street, they met a MEFESZ⁷⁰ delegation and spoke with Ferenc Jánosi, the former Secretary General of the Patriotic People's Front, and Erik Molnár, a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers, who essentially accepted the Corvinists' conditions. The details of the surrender of arms had to be clarified at the Ministry of National Defence – withdrawal route, locations of arms handover – and on returning to Corvin, another meeting took place at 11.00 on the 28th of October, at which the complete surrender of arms was finally rejected. "We agreed that in order to maintain order, we would also offer a freedom fighter in addition to the soldier and police officer."⁷¹

On 29th October, Prime Minister Imre Nagy and Minister of National Defence Károly Janza met the representatives of the insurgent groups. At the negotiations, the Corvinists were represented by László Iván Kovács Ödön Pongrácz and Tibor Bornemissza. "Prime Minister Imre Nagy accepted our requests and stated: «Boys, do you think that I am not as Hungarian as you are?» We believed that he was so..."⁷² The government demanded an immediate surrender of arms, in return the insurgents wanted the the Soviet forces to leave. The Corvinists' proposal for joint national guard – police – freedom fighter patrol was still rejected at that time, although they tried to organize the national guard based on a similar principle later on.⁷³ In the end, a compromise was reached, if the Soviet troops withdrew from Budapest, the insurgents would lay down their arms before the Hungarian

67 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 153. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

68 Eörsi 1998.

69 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 153. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

70 The Hungarian abbreviation for the Unified Organization of Hungarian University and College Students. On 16th October 1956, an organization independent of the communist youth organization, the Democratic Youth Association (DISZ), was established in Szeged.

71 Ibid. 154.

72 Ibid. 154.

73 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 34.

units arriving in their place.⁷⁴ After Imre Nagy's departure, they tried to agree on the details with Károly Janza, and the wording was finished around 17.00. On the way to Corvin, István Angyal,⁷⁵ the commander of the Tűzoltó Street insurgents, invited László Iván Kovács to another meeting at the police station.⁷⁶ At the late evening meeting, the Corvinists were represented by László Iván Kovács. Police chief captain Sándor Kopácsi stated that the insurgent groups have to recognize the Imre Nagy government and they have to support the implementation of the government's program and the restoration of order. For the government, this was the main issue, the basis of the agreement. László Iván Kovács argued in favour of accepting the agreement, but the insurgents agreed that they were willing to lay down their arms only in front of Hungarian troops and only after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from the capital. At the same time, the majority of the insurgents declared that they were willing to join the new armed forces, the newly formed Unified National Guard Command, and they also accepted that young people under the age of eighteen would be demobilized.⁷⁷

On the 29th of October, László Iván Kovács also recorded that when he returned to Corvin, he went through the guard posts, approved the installation of a freshly captured cannon and arranged the distribution of a large amount of food that had arrived from the countryside.⁷⁸ The handing over of the weapons, originally planned for the afternoon, was moved to 9.00 the next morning, and the Kilián barracks was designated as the handover point at the suggestion of László Iván Kovács. In order to clarify the details, they were promised that Major General Gyula Váradi would negotiate with them personally. Since they had not yet received a satisfactory answer about the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, a commanders' meeting was held at Corvin cinema in the evening, to which the commander of the Tompa Street armed forces, János Bárány, was invited.⁷⁹ Major General Gyula Váradi arrived around 21:00, and Colonel Maléter from the Kilián barracks also went to the meeting. The insurgents declared that an unconditional surrender is out of question.⁸⁰ Maléter considered further resistance to be hopeless, proposed the acceptance of the Imre

74 Horváth 1995, 122.

75 Istvan Angyal was the commander of another revolutionary group, the Tűzoltó Street revolutionaries, 1958. he was executed on 1th of December.

76 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 154–155. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

77 Ibid. 155.

78 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 154–155. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

79 Horváth 1995, 122–123.

80 Ibid. 155–156.

Nagy government and at least partial disarmament.⁸¹ László Iván Kovács was also aware of the fact that they would not be able to resist a serious infantry attack, but he also knew that the Corvinists would rather die, than lay down their arms unconditionally.⁸² László Iván Kovács finally announced the terms of Corvin. They recognize the Imre Nagy government and support the government's policies, but demand the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Budapest. They insisted that the government should declare the country's independence and neutrality, should hold free elections in early 1957 with the participation of several parties, should dissolve the ÁVH⁸³ and should announce a full amnesty for the civilians who participated in the fighting.⁸⁴ However, referring to his order, Major General Váradi demanded an unconditional surrender of arms and indicated that this had already been agreed upon in the parliament. At that time, several people asked László Iván Kovács, even though Ödön Pongrátz was also present at the hearing in question at the parliament, why he made such an agreement, László Iván Kovács said that the surrender of arms was tied to the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The negotiation stalled, but Colonel Pál Maléter drew up another six-point proposal, in which the main demand of the insurgents was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the territory of Hungary and the transfer of some of the revolutionaries to the army and police.⁸⁵ However, Gergely Pongrátz was not willing to accept either the recognition of the Imre Nagy government or the acceptance of the insurgents into the government's armed forces although these two points were in Maléter's proposition, but the majority of the insurgents considered the partial surrender of arms acceptable. Váradi consulted with Minister of National Defence Károly Janza on the phone, and Prime Minister Imre Nagy also agreed. However, it was not possible to agree on one of the important conditions of the handover of weapons that the insurgents would allow the Hungarian troops into the territory insurgents controlled. This was especially opposed by the Pongrátz brothers, Sándor Antalóczy ("Doctor"), László Iván Kovács considered it acceptable, and Pál Maléter did not take a position on the issue. In the end, arms were not laid down – although most of the Soviet troops did indeed leave the capital – for which the parties mutually blamed each other. The insurgents waited in vain for the Hungarian troops, and the Hungarian soldiers – mainly based on the words of Gergely Pongrátz – did not trust that they would be allowed into the area.⁸⁶

81 Horváth 1995, 125.

82 Ibid. 155–156.

83 The Hungarian abbreviation for the political police now operating within the Ministry of the Interior, see 3. footnote.

84 Eörsi 2001, 71.

85 Horváth 1995, 126.

86 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 41.

Internal conflicts in Corvin passage

The unsuccessful armistice negotiations had two benefits for László Iván Kovács. On the one hand, he showed his negotiating skills on behalf of the Corvinists, on the other hand, his position in the negotiations increased the distrust towards him among some of his fellow commanders, especially the Pongrátz brothers. After the Ministry of National Defence found out on 30th of October that the arms had not been laid down they were outraged and a new military delegation, Major General Gyula Uszta – Maléter's former commander – and Major General Mihály Horváth visited the Kilián barracks. Uszta asked under what conditions Maléter was willing to carry out further orders and get involved in the organizational work related to the establishment of order. Maléter read out five points from paper – in which, in addition to the recognition of the Imre Nagy government, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the fulfilment of the university students' demands, etc. were included – but he stated that five points must also be accepted by the Corvin community. At Corvin, Gergely Pongrátz, dr. Sándor Antalóczy and Ödön Pongrátz greeted the guests with distaste and announced that they would not lay down their arms under any circumstances. (The debate was so heated that although they were notified that many people were shooting in Köztársaság Square, they did not address the issue.) After the debate, Major General Uszta and his entourage, as well as Ödön Pongrátz, László Schmidt and dr. Antalóczy went to the police headquarters in Deák Square, where discussions were already taking place about the formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces Committee and the tasks of organizing the National Guard. In order to establish the Revolutionary Armed Forces Committee, a preparatory committee was chosen, the members of which included Major General Mihály Horváth, Major General Béla Király and Ödön Pongrátz. A meeting was called for the next day, the 31st of October at 12.00, and Imre Nagy appreciated the formation of the Preparatory Committee⁸⁷. The Corvinists supported the establishment of the new armed force, the National Guard, Gergely Pongrátz and László Iván Kovács also agreed that the organization and training of the insurgent unit was an urgent task, for which Colonel Andreas Martin, commander of the Zrínyi Miklós Military Academy, when he visited Corvin passage, promised support. Colonel András Márton⁸⁸ made a very good impression on Gergely Pongrátz, who would have liked to see him as Minister of National Defence instead of Károly Janza. On this day – 30th of October – the Corvin passage received a large amount of foreign food and when the fighting stopped, the journalists came to take pictures of everything. At the same time, many people wanted to join the best-known insurgent centre, whom László Iván Kovács unsuccessfully

87 Horváth 1995, 130–133.

88 Commander of the Military Academy “Zrínyi Miklós”, his name also came up as Minister of defense with the support of the Pongratz brothers.

tried to send away and, against his orders, they were supplied with weapons from a truck. “Partial discipline was also completely over. Commands grew like mushrooms, but anyway, there were suddenly a lot of us. Instead of a military attack, we got a civilian one, and it was much more dangerous. Anarchy everywhere – arbitrary measures – and the number of insurgents increased to approximately 5,000 people.”⁸⁹ On 30th of October, before midnight, ten volunteer officers arrived under the leadership of Colonel Ödön Dienes,⁹⁰ but the Corvinists rejected military control and several of the insurgents feared that volunteer officers must be communists and they wanted to disarm them. Ödön Dienes made the soldiers swear loyalty to Corvin and started organizing the national guard battalion.⁹¹ About a hundred people, representatives of insurgent groups, the national defence, the police and several industrial plants came to the following day’s meeting – the purpose of which was “to set up a unified command and appoint the person of the Minister of National Defence”⁹². László Iván Kovács from Corvin passage, dr. Sándor Antalóczy, Tibor Bornemissza, Gergely and Ödön Pongrátz were also present, while the police was represented by police colonel Sándor Kopácsi, the army was represented by major general Gyula Váradi, Mihály Horváth, colonel András Márton, and Lieutenant Colonel János Solymosi. Gergely Pongrátz spoke up against Colonel Maléter. He said that they did not trust Maléter, as they had several firefights with the soldiers of the Kilián barracks and the colonel released the prisoners entrusted to him by the Corvinists. In addition, he objected to the unprecedented publicity and promotion campaign related to the Kilián barracks and Maléter. Despite all this, he still accepted Maléter’s offer of friendship (he was later accused of murder).⁹³ László Iván Kovács “despite all kinds of agitation” considered Maléter to be an “honest man” and a “trained soldier” and therefore supported his appointment as Minister of National Defence, which “Antalóczi and Bornemissza tried to make impossible with various stories.”⁹⁴ The Pongrátz brothers, Antalóczi and Bornemissza, would have preferred to see Colonel András Márton in this position. The participants in the meeting finally decided to create a unified national guard, under the command of Béla Király, and defined the national guard’s main tasks, the restoration of public order, the disarmament

89 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 156. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

90 Senior teacher of the Military Academy “Zalka Máté”.

91 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 46.

92 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 156. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

93 Horváth 1995, 142.

94 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 156. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

of the ÁVH⁹⁵ and the maintenance of combat readiness until the departure of the Soviet troops.⁹⁶ László Iván Kovács's stand for Maléter contrasted him even more with the internal opposition of the Pongrátz brothers, Antalóczi and Bornemissza, who began to take control on 31st of October. László Iván Kovács asked Maléter for advice, who suggested arresting the Pongrátz brothers.⁹⁷ However, the commander of the Kilián barracks was not safe either, after it turned out that "an anarchist group among the Corvinists" wanted to execute Maléter, so they organized his guard. From then on six insurgents guarded Colonel Maléter,⁹⁸ one of them even accompanied him to Tököl, where the insurgent was also arrested.⁹⁹ However, Iván Kovács rejected the arrest of Pongrátz brothers – fearing that the "fever of mistrust", which "had already made everyone see the ÁVH in one another" would take over even more. The fact that he freed two people, considered to be members of political police on 30th of October increased distrust towards the commander-in-chief. He knew one of them personally as a football player, so he vouched for him, while the other, whom he did not consider dangerous, as he was only a driver, he assigned to work in a paramedic room.¹⁰⁰

The tension between László Iván Kovács and Gergely Pongrátz became particularly high. The way the commander-in-chief later described his former comrade for the interrogator reveals a lot about the relationship between the two. "I got to know Pongrátz as an honest person, but later this opinion of him changed. At first I thought he was a selfless patriot and a good comrade, but I realized that he is selfish and careerist. He was arrogant. He wanted to solve everything by command and using violence. The patriotic mask fell off him, it became clear that he was only fighting for his individual career. He hated the existing system. He referred to the fact that his sick father had also been imprisoned. He also hated the Russians, the whole of communism. He was also a supporter of closer cooperation with the West." István Angyal remembered that the Corvinists were struggling with serious internal strife, "and they were so inundated with confused theorists that they didn't have time to prevent a lot of arbitrariness and robbery. [...] During the negotiations, I got to know [Iván Kovács] as the calm, composed leader of the Corvin group. I learned that this may have played a

95 The Hungarian abbreviation for the political police now operating within the Ministry of the Interior, see 3. footnote.

96 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 46.

97 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 156. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

98 Eörsi 2000.

99 Horváth 1995, 129.

100 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 156. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957.

role in his subsequent replacement.”¹⁰¹ According to István Vén,¹⁰² László Iván Kovács “in intelligence and leadership ability was superior to any person from Corvin.”¹⁰³

The following morning, on 1st of November in 1956, “a smaller group was called together, in which they participated: Bornemissza, Gergely Pongráz, Ödön Pongráz, a third Pongráz, dr. Antalóczi, Colonel Martin, Captain Popovics, Lieutenant Colonel Solymosi, former commander László Szabó” and they decided to replace László Iván Kovács. The justification was that his nervous condition was unsatisfactory and he was “not strong enough” as a commander.¹⁰⁴ Gergely Pongráz was elected as the new commander-in-chief, and László Iván Kovács, László Szabó and Imre Erdős became deputy commanders. László Iván Kovács was very hurt by Pongráz brothers’ procedure, Antalóczi and Bornemissza’s intrigue, and he told them that they were “careerists and scoundrels”. To this, Bornemissza replied that Iván Kovács would be delegated to the “general staff” – the leadership of the National Guard – as he could do more there. In view of the establishment of this “general staff” – of which László Iván Kovács actually became a member – and other organizational issues, Béla Király convened another meeting at the Deák Square headquarters at 10:00. on 1st of November. Although the organization of the National Guard progressed quickly, this process could not be completed due to the Soviet intervention on 4th of November.

On the evening of 3rd of November, László Iván Kovács spoke to the commander of the armoured vehicles that the tanks should be set up to ambush position, and even the appropriate places were marked on the map. He tried to convince the Pongráz brothers to send twenty young insurgents for artillery training, but the Pongráz brothers considered this unnecessary. At this time, he gave János Mesz¹⁰⁵ written instructions to start the training.¹⁰⁶ On 3th of November, it may already have seemed that the revolution had achieved significant results. On 28th of October, the Government of Imre Nagy declared a cessation of arms, on 30th of October announced the end of the one-party system and promised free elections. On 31th of October, Soviet troops were withdrawn from Budapest, and on 1st

101 Confession of István Angyal cited in Eörsi–Filep 2007, 48–49.

102 István Vén University student was a wounded transporter during the revolution in the area of Corvin passage. After the revolution, he joined László Ivan Kovacs and his revolutionary organization. The Pest County Court sentenced him to 8 years in prison. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 218–224. NB.002/1957. 5. sentence of Pest County Court.

103 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 44. confession document of Stephen Vén. Budapest, on 16th of April in 1957.

104 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 44. confession document of Stephen Vén Budapest, on 6th of April in 1957.

105 One of the artillery commanders of the revolutionaries fighting in the Corvin passage, one of the leaders of the attackers against the Communist Party house in Köztársaság tér.

106 According to Gergely Pongráz, László Iván Kovács sent the crew of the armoured vehicle of the Corvin to sleep despite Pongráz’s orders, which resulted in heavy casualties the next day. However, the latter version is unlikely.

November the Government of Imre Nagy proclaimed Hungary's neutrality. In the first days of November, the organization of the National Guard, consisting of revolutionaries, also gained momentum. On 4th of November, the Corvin was attacked by a strong Soviet force, the command moved to the basement, where they cut through the wall and secured the exit to Práter Street. Then he ran into Mária Kozma¹⁰⁷ again, whom his peers considered to be an agent, but he took her under his protection.¹⁰⁸ "There was an argument here, from which it became clear that Iván Kovács was considered as a traitor, and the fact that he had taken me to his defence was found to be better evidence, and we were both arrested."¹⁰⁹ László Iván Kovács was escorted to the Kilián barracks, where two of his escorts loaded their guns and ordered László Iván Kovács to shout into the barracks. They were fired at from the building, so the group ran away. After getting rid of his companions he went to Béla Király, but could not talk to him, so he went home. Freed from his companions, he went to Béla Király, but could not talk to him, so he went home. When he went out to get food on 7th of November, he learned that Corvin's headquarters had ordered his liquidation. He returned to Alsógöd on 11th of November, and sent his younger brother in for the clothes left in his sublet.¹¹⁰

After the revolution

At dawn on 4th November, the Soviet army launched Operation "Whirlwind" against Hungary to crush the Hungarian revolution. The armed opposition of the revolutionaries in the capital collapsed within days. The Soviet Red Army helped the government of János Kádár to power. The Kádár government began the internment, imprisonment and prosecution of revolutionaries. After 4th of November, it became increasingly clear that – despite János Kádár's radio statements promising impunity – all leaders of the revolution would be retaliated against. At that time, László Iván Kovács still had a choice, he could have left the country, like many of his comrades-in-arms and his brothers Attila and Csaba. He later justified his decision to stay at home and bear arms by saying that he was afraid of the revenge of the Corvinists who had falsely accused him, and that he wanted to prove that he was not a traitor. "It hurt me a lot that they believed me to be a traitor and I knew that my path to the West was closed as well."¹¹¹ he testified. He hid his weapons in Göd and started making

107 She was 15 years old during the revolution. In the Corvin passage he worked alongside László Iván Kovács, later she was also declared a traitor. After the revolution, he was recruited by the political police under the pseudonym "Éva Kántor".

108 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 158. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 19th of March in 1957

109 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 44. note of agent "Éva Kántor" Budapest, on 26th of January in 1957

110 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 159.

111 Ibid.

leaflets against Kádár. “I have hidden the weapons so that when it appears possible, I can begin armed actions...”¹¹² told in interrogation.

From the end of November, as soon as work began again, he went to work. Around this time, he began to write down his thoughts on the revolution, socialism, the proper state system, and the organization of the National Guard in a notebook. His notes were about the possibilities of resistance, revolution, and even the continuation of the armed struggle, as well as the boycott of the Kádár regime.¹¹³ On 6th of December, he met again the university student István Vén, known from Corvin, with whom he kept in touch from then on.

In January, he approached István Vén at Gödöllő and asked him to get a stencil machine and paper for him. Iván Kovács then mentioned the name of Pál Maléter to him as a person whose popularity could be used. The plan to free Pál Maléter was undeniably naive, although it was a symbolic idea, since even if the fifty armed men he considered necessary for the execution had gathered, the success of the enterprise would have been doubtful. The idea is also romantic that after Maléter is freed, Maléter will be helped to go to the Bakony, from where he will send a radio message to the nation. For this, however, he already found a technician who agreed to make a high-performance radio transmitter.¹¹⁴ At the same time, István Vén was unable to get either a stencil machine or paper, but he gave Iván Kovács three tickets to the Margaret Island sports pool and they agreed to meet there next Thursday, on 6th of February. László Iván Kovács had already arrived at the meeting with Zsuzsanna Horváth, who ran the kitchen at Corvin and they were already mutually attracted to each other. László Iván Kovács visited Zsuzsanna Horváth on 5th of February, with whom he met almost every day from then on and to whom he reported his political ideas and plans. The woman was attracted to the insurgent commander, who was ten years younger than her, and from then on she became his lover’s helper and supporter in everything her own arrest was partly due to her interest in his fate.¹¹⁵ At the meeting in the swimming pool, they mainly talked about the liberation of Maléter and, if the plan succeeds, how the resistance could be extended to the whole country.

On 23rd of February in 1957, László Iván Kovács drew up the plan of the Turul Party, which would have been an illegal organization operating according to strict conspiracy rules. He also typed ten copies of his plan of the party, but on 2nd of March he made changes to the text. The Turul Party wanted to spread its message in the form of leaflets, and his colleagues Erzsébet Frey and Tünde Medvei helped to prepare them, and István Vén also

112 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 122. Interrogation report of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 25th of June in 1957.

113 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 255–288. notebook of László Iván Kovács.

114 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 72–73.

115 Ibid. 75–76.

got involved in the ‘organization’.¹¹⁶ Among the party’s demands were the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the restoration of the Imre Nagy government, the dissolution of the armed forces, the authorization of a multi-party system and the declaration of the country’s independence.¹¹⁷ “Hungarians. We call you for unity and a united struggle of resistance – the Turul Party. [...] The unmarked graves multiply every day and the prisons become more and more crowded, just because we want to live freely, without exploitation and terror. Everyone, both the Kremlin masters and Kádár’s murderous henchmen, must realize that the fairy tale of communism is over.”¹¹⁸

László Iván Kovács probably caught the attention of the authorities already in January 1957. Mária Kozma, who was arrested together with her, was taken by the fleeing Corvinists. A Soviet armoured vehicle ran over the car transporting her at Tarján and she was hospitalized. Even at the beginning of 1957, the investigative bodies did not have agents among the Corvinists, which is why Mária Kozma who was 15 years old was recruited. She cooperated with the political investigation organisations, but she lost her cover story when László Schmidt (“Blackbird”) was arrested.¹¹⁹ On 20th of January in 1957, she accused László Schmidt and István Debrentei of being a revolutionist and “Mária Kozma is voluntarily searching for people who carried out hostile activities in the vicinity of Corvin passage. She gave us a report signed with her own name on recognized people.”¹²⁰ In her “curriculum vitae” dated on 1st of March, she also mentioned the insurgent commander as “László Ivankovics”, adding that he lives in Alsógöd. On 9th of March, the authorities searched for weapons in the student hostel of the University of Agricultural Sciences at Gödöllő, when they found the leaflets hidden by István Vén, the calls of the Turul Party. István Vén was arrested and it was only a matter of time before it was László Iván Kovács’s turn to be arrested. On the 11th, Iván Kovács mentioned to Zsuzsanna Horváth that he felt that a woman had been watching him and following him for four weeks, and even threatened to kill him. On 12th of March, he was finally taken into custody and his interrogation began, during which he noticeably tried to testify about himself rather than others. The police also arrested László Iván Kovács’s father, József Iván Kovács. On 17th of March, he was permitted to write a letter to Zsuzsanna Horváth, in which he encouraged her to tell everything she knew and heard. “I love you very much – but I can’t expect you, and I don’t want you to take anything upon yourself or to keep anything silent because of this.” However, Zsuzsanna

116 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 42-43. confession document of István Vén Budapest, on 6th of April in 1957.

117 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 42. confession document of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 14th of March in 1957.

118 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. *Hazának rendületlenül légy híve ó magyar!* leaflet p. 2.

119 ÁBTL 3.1.1. B-82723. 13. recruiting proposal of Maria Kozma. Budapest, 8th of March in 1958.

120 ÁBTL 3.1.1. B-82723. 13. recruiting proposal of Maria Kozma. Budapest, 8th of March in 1958.

Horváth agreed to be complicit with him.¹²¹ His father, who knew about his plans, was eventually released, but István Vén and Zsuzsanna Horváth remained in custody. On 22nd of August in 1957, the council of the Pest County Court led by Mrs. Major Miklós sentenced László Iván Kovács to death, István Vén to eight years, and Zsuzsanna Horváth to six years in prison.¹²² On 27th of December in 1957, the People's Court Council of the Supreme Court acting at the second level, led by Ferenc Vida, rejected the appeals, and the following day, László Iván Kovács' request for mercy was also rejected. His lawyer, Géza Egri, submitted a legal protest to the President of the Supreme Court, but this was also rejected, so at dawn on 30th of December in 1957, the death sentence was carried out in the courtyard of the National Prison.¹²³

"I was present when the death sentence was pronounced" his mother reported on the trial. "I became sick; I could hardly walk out the door. When my son was taken away, not a single sound came out of my throat. Some people heard on the news the next morning that he had been executed. The next day I went to a cemetery I had never been to. I just walked along the snowy road, following the car tracks. I stopped by the newest grave. Maybe my son's grave, I thought. Almost 40 years have passed since then. For a long time in neck-high weeds, harassed by mounted police trampling over graves, I could only go out to where the headstones stand today."¹²⁴

László Iván Kovács asked his parents through his attorney, Géza Egri, if his love, Zsuzsanna Horváth, was ever to be released, not to leave her alone, to take care of her. However, Zsuzsanna Horváth is believed to be broken in at prison. From 13th of December in 1957, she was employed as a prison agent in Dorog and then in Esztergom, used in the investigation of a murder case.¹²⁵ In 1959, Mrs. Iván Kovács already visited Zsuzsanna Horváth's sister, as they hoped that the amnesty would also apply to her. On 10th of May, they contacted her and offered that "if there is no other option, I will find a home with them, as this was also their son's wish."¹²⁶ They went to the cemetery together, Mrs. Kovács told about her two other sons, Attila and Csaba, who served in the foreign legion in France. This caught the attention of the investigators and they commissioned their agent to obtain the twins' address (which succeeded in 1961), and at the same time they took action at the II/13. department so that her outgoing and incoming letters can be passed on. Later on, she managed to find out that Attila, the eldest son of Mrs. Iván Kovács, had indeed escaped to France and was in Oran, allegedly working for the French counter-intelligence service. Her

121 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 89–90.

122 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. 218–224. NB.002/1957. 5. sentence of Pest County Court.

123 Eörsi–Filep 2007, 100.

124 Orbán 2001, 344.

125 ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-29112 reports of agent alias "Erzsébet Erzsébet".

126 Ibid. 90.

younger son, Csaba, made his way through Yugoslavia to Austria and then to the French Foreign Legion.¹²⁷ Later on, one of his most important tasks remained maintaining contact with the Iván Kovács family, so he reported on József Iván Kovács's visit and his behaviour at work.¹²⁸

The memory of László Iván Kovács

László Iván Kovács's fate and memory were influenced both by the fact that, while other participants in the revolution fled to the West, he remained at home, because "the captain does not abandon a sinking ship."¹²⁹ "My views are the same, I did not change them after the 4th of November 1956, I saw the need to implement its neutrality. I am a supporter of a multi-party system, because social injustices can be eliminated in this way."¹³⁰ he testified. For a long time, the harsh truth of the survivors suppressed his voice about a free and independent Hungary, a more humane society and, above all, his role in the revolution. His memory shows a sad parallel with the story of Görgey. General Artúr Görgey was also accused of treason by a comrade-in-arms who was forced into emigration and gave powerful speeches, with whom Görgey opposed several times during the days of the revolution. Public opinion typically accepted the accusation against Görgey as true, while in the case of László Iván Kovács, it was difficult to break through the wall of silence and refute the recollections of the few eyewitnesses with personal memories and indisputable merits, who presented his person and actions in an untruthful way. ■

127 Ibid. 93.

128 Ibid. 244.

129 Words of Mrs. Mori Zsuzsanna Horváth are quoted in Eörsi–Filep 2007, 109.

130 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626. 126. Interrogation report of László Iván Kovács. Budapest, on 9th of June in 1957.

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ÁBTL = Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security

ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626/1. László Iván Kovács and his companions II. volume

ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145626 László Iván Kovács and his companions I. volume

ÁBTL 3.1.1. B-82723 Agent alias „Kántor Éva” „B” i.e. recruitment dossier

ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-29112 /1; /2 Agent alias „Vámos Erzsébet” operations dossiers

ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry „Vámos Erzsébet”

KIVONAT

Iván Kovács László, 1956. október 25-e és november 1-je között a Corvin köz főparancsnoka, majd november 4-éig parancsnokhelyettese, a forradalom egyik legendás alakja. Rátermett katonai vezetőnek bizonyult, ám a harcok irányítása közben sem fedkezett meg az emberségről. A sebesült szovjet katonákat átadta a szovjet parancsnokságnak, még az ÁVH gyanúsnak tartott személyekkel szemben is megtiltotta az önkényeskedést, mindenképpen meg akarta őrizni a forradalom tisztaságát. Következésként kiállt az ország függetlensége, a többpártrendszer, a szabad választások, a szovjet csapatok kivonása mellett, de hajlandó volt – legalábbis a választásokig – elfogadni a Nagy Imre kormányt. Iván Kovács László november 4-e utáni tevékenysége talán éppen olyan jelentős volt, mint a forradalom alatti. A forradalom hadügyminiszterének, Maléter Pálnak a kiszabadására kidolgozott terve, a Turul Párt megalapítása, egy új, nemzeti forradalmi hadsereg és a többpártrendszeren alapuló demokratikus, független Magyarország eszméje a kihallgatói, bírái előtt ugyanolyan súllyal estek latba, mint a forradalom alatti fegyveres tevékenysége. A harcok alatt és után egyaránt példát mutatott, kivégzésével pedig a forradalom mártírjává vált.

KULCSSZAVAK: kommunizmus, Corvin köz, az 1956-os magyar forradalom, Iván Kovács László