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**Author's note:**

The German translation of these interviews is available through KU ScholarWorks in "Von Ungarn nach Auschwitz: Die verschwiegene Warnung" at <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/6817>.

An English translation of the Vrba-Wetzler report may be found at <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/auschproto.html>

See also: "The 'Myth' and Reality of Rescue from the Holocaust: The Karski-Koestler and Vrba-Wetzler Reports" at <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/6834>.

**Text of paper:**

## Interviews

Sándor Szenes<sup>1</sup>

(Edited and translated by Frank Baron)

When and how did the Auschwitz report get to Hungary? In the historical works available there are as many uncertainties and contradictions as there are questions.

Randolph L. Braham carefully studied and compared the eleven reports and reminiscences of eight individuals (the two escapees, the two individuals who helped them in Zilina, and the four prominent Jewish leaders in Hungary during the summer of 1944), but he has found so many contradictions that he was forced to admit that we cannot determine with certainty when the transmission took place, and only in the second half of June did the Jewish leaders in Hungary begin to send the report to influential government circles, church leaders, and their friends in other countries.<sup>2</sup>

Other studies about the question of how and when are no less contradictory. Jenő Lévai mentions a 16-page report in Hebrew sent from Bratislava, supposedly reaching Budapest some time in June.<sup>3</sup> Dezső Schön, editor of the *Uj Kelet*, a Hungarian journal appearing in Israel, writes in his book about the Eichmann trial that the report arrived in Budapest about the middle

of May.<sup>4</sup> Elek Karsai writes: "... In the middle of June people were aware of the Auschwitz death camps in Budapest; they knew its layout and operation."<sup>5</sup> Péter Bokor simply mentions in his narrative that "shortly" after the completion of the report its contents were known in the east and the west. Archbishop Verolino Gennaro, the former advisor to the papal ambassador in Budapest, made the following assertion in an interview in Rome: "The middle of June . . . This was the time at which the Auschwitz report reached the world, even Budapest and, what is more, Buda (i.e., at the royal residence)"

In the following montage of interviews, prepared in 1981 and 1982, about the relationship of the churches to the Jewish population, the speakers are four contemporary witnesses, and in the following excerpts they speak about the Auschwitz report: József Eliás, a retired Calvinist pastor; Mrs. László Küllői-Rhorer (née Mária Székely), translator and interpreter; Dr. András Zakar, a retired Catholic priest and the former secretary of Cardinal Justinian Serédi; and the author Sándor Török.

In response to the question how and when, József Eliás, the former secretary of the *Jó Pásztor Bizottság* (Good Shepherd Mission) asserts, in contrast to the publications cited above, that he received a German copy of the report "directly from people associated closely with the escapees on the last days of April or the first days of May." His coworker of those days, Mária Székely, the translator of the report, remembers the first encounter with the German text in the following way: "It could have been about the end of April, or, more likely, the first days of May. This memory belongs to one of those most agonizing experiences that I simply cannot forget." Eliás reports, moreover: Mária Székely "brought six copies of the typed Hungarian text in seven or eight days. Eliás could begin the distribution of the Hungarian copies on about the 10th of May or shortly thereafter. The addressees were primarily the religious leaders of the major churches in Hungary: Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran. But Török's interview shows that the report also reached hands at the highest government circles.

A binding rule in the authentication of historical facts dictates that the whole or part of reminiscences can be viewed as reliable only if verified by independent sources. Eliás's report was first and most immediately confirmed by Mrs. Küllői-Rhorer. Sándor Török, one of the persons entrusted with passing on the report, also represents confirmation; unfortunately, no other members of his select group are now available to be interviewed. András Zakar, the former

secretary of the cardinal, represents an indirect but convincing witness. Finally, authentication is provided by a letter of May 17, 1944, by the representatives of the Calvinist Church to Prime Minister Dome Sztójay, who was responsible for the deportations. In this letter there is an unmistakable warning: We know that deportation means "final solution" (*Endlösung*). As it becomes evident from the Eliás interview, this assertion was written with the awareness of the Auschwitz report.

Further confirmation by historians and archivists enables me to state as a fact that the Auschwitz report was in Budapest at the end of April or at the beginning of May, and by the time the deportations of Jews began from the countryside the report was "on the desks of all church leaders." Unfortunately, church histories of this period and the diaries of church leaders overlook this fact.

Up to now I have mentioned only the names of the persons interviewed. A brief biographical sketch introduces each of the interviews.

<sup>1</sup> Sándor Szenes introduces his interviews. Frank Baron's translation is based on the Hungarian text that appeared in the Hungarian journal *Valóság* (no. 10, Oct. 1983). The translator had the benefit of help from Mária Küllői-Rhorer (Mária Székely) in checking the accuracy of the translation.

<sup>2</sup> Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), II, pp. 709-724.

<sup>3</sup> Jenő Lévai, *Szürke Könyv* [Grey Book] (Budapest: Officina, 1946), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Dezső Schön, *A jeruzsalmi per* [The Jerusalem Trial] (Tel Aviv, 1946).

<sup>5</sup> Eiek Karsai, "Miért nem bombázták az amerikaiak a náci haláltáborokat?" [Why did the Americans Not Bomb the Nazi Death Camps?] *Historia* 1 (1981).

<sup>6</sup> With the emphasis on Buda the author clearly wished to emphasize that even Admiral Horthy, whose residence was in Buda, was aware of the report. Péter Bokor, *Végjáték a Duna mentén* [The End Game on the Shores of the Danube] (Budapest, 1982), pp. 115-126.

## József Eliás

“Cardinal Dr. Jusztinián Serédi was the first addressee.”

I first became acquainted with the name of József Eliás, a retired Calvinist pastor, during the early sixties when I lived in Debrecen for a few years in the capacity of reporter for the newspaper *Népszabadság* [Freedom for the People] in the counties of Hajdu-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár.

We became personally acquainted in about 1973, at a difficult time for him. He had been suspended by his superiors and brought before a church court, where he defended himself. Having been assigned by my newspaper to cover the case, I became convinced that his cause was honorable, and I followed his trial with special attention.

Few people are aware, even in Debrecen, that József Eliás received extraordinary international recognition. The International Hebrew Christian Alliance (IHCA), which considers its chief task the struggle against racial and sectarian prejudice, established a prize during the Second World War and voted to award 800 British pounds to church representatives able to contribute the most in saving lives in countries occupied by Germany. At its 1948 congress in London, the IHCA honored József Eliás with its award.

The year 1942 brought about great changes in the young Eliás. In the summer he had been deputy pastor in Cegléd, where he joined the subversive organization named after former Prime Minister Teleki\*, the predecessor of the organization formed after the German occupation, Magyar Függetlenségi Mozgalom (MFM) [Hungarian Independence Movement]. He had been recruited by an old friend, Dr. Géza Soós, the secretary of the Calvinist international student organization Soli Deo Gloria and consultant of the Foreign Office. Bishop László Ravasz called him to Budapest as early as December of that year. From that time on he was spiritual advisor and later director of the Calvinist Church's Good Shepherd Mission, an organization dedicated to the

spiritual life and defense of Christians of Jewish origin. He did not accept this post immediately or eagerly. But he made the decision when he learned that before him five clergymen had refused this position.

His tenure as spiritual advisor began in the winter of 1942-1943. The months represented a decisive turning point in the war: As the Germans at Stalingrad and the Hungarian army at the River Don suffered catastrophic defeats, the nation became more involved in the war. József Eliás reports:

"From the beginning the difficult tasks of saving lives was the major concern of the Good Shepherd Mission's work. For me the tasks of the Church and the movement converged." In the spring of 1944 Elias received an extraordinary responsibility from Géza Soós, his contact in the movement: that he should translate the Auschwitz report from German into Hungarian and organize the secret delivery to designated addresses.

\* Pál Teleki, professor of geography and later prime minister (1939-1941), committed suicide and thus dramatically protested against Hungary's participation in Germany's invasion of Yugoslavia. For information on Géza Soos see the introduction above and Szenes, *Befejezetlen múlt*, pp. 92-93.

**JÓZSEF ELIÁS:** In 1944, on one of the last days of April or on one of the first days of May, Géza Soós invited me to meet with him. He indicated in advance that he wished to discuss an important matter at length. As I recall, we met in the café of the National Museum. Géza, who was a person of great energy but otherwise calm and collected, seemed on this occasion to vibrate with excitement. I sensed that he had something extraordinary to communicate. He said that a secret organization of prisoners in a concentration camp of the Germans in Poland was successful in bringing about the escape of two young Jews. The escape bordered on the miraculous. These men had the task of informing the world about what was going on in Auschwitz. Having reached a place of safety, the escapees prepared a detailed report about Auschwitz, which they supplemented with drawings. They referred to it as a kind of official record in order to emphasize its factuality and reliability. A representative of our opposition movement on the border of Slovakia received one of the German copies of the report; the messenger had arrived with it in Budapest on the morning of our meeting. The leaders of the movement decided that I should be responsible for the tasks that the report required.

**SZENES:** What were these tasks?

**ELIÁS:** We needed, first of all, an accurate, clear, and speedy translation from German into Hungarian; second, six typed copies of the Hungarian text; third, five copies to persons designated by Géza transmitted in such a way that the persons involved should not even suspect from where and through whom they received the report. Fourth, we had to return the sixth copy and the original German copy we had to return to Geza in a manner to be indicated at a later time. Finally, the Hungarian copies should not be copied on the office typewriters of Good Shepherd.

During our conversation there was an empty chair between us, and we put our briefcases on it. I can still visualize how Géza slipped the report into mine. After he listed the addresses (among them those of the highest ranking church leaders), he added, "The government officials must not learn that the report is in our hands. It is not necessary to enlighten them because," he emphasized, "the head of the government and most of the ministers under him know about Auschwitz and its function. The opposition movement wants to orient the church leaders, above all, so that the government will not mislead them and so that these influential individuals can exert pressure on the government to prevent the tragedy awaiting the Jews." Géza said that the movement would find a way to get the report into the hands of Hungarians and others living in Switzerland. Finally, he stressed that those whom I involved in this undertaking as translator and messenger must be loyal, capable, and reliable people. We discussed who might be the right persons for delivering the report. As far as the translation was concerned, we agreed on choosing Mária Székely (later Küllői-Rhorer), my most loyal, well-educated, and tested colleague.

**SZENES:** Did you know about Auschwitz when you worked for the Good Shepherd organization?

**ELIÁS:** When I received the report, I was already informed about almost all essential aspects. My colleagues had heard only all kinds of unconfirmable rumors about German concentration camps.

**SZENES:** How did you get information about almost everything?

**ELIÁS:** At that time an exceptionally good relationship developed between the Calvinist Good Shepherd Mission and the Catholic Holy Cross Society [Magyar Szent Kereszt Egyesület, MSZKE]. This organization was concerned with the protection of the spiritual and secular interests of Catholics of Jewish origin. In 1944, it carried out its mission under the protection of Baron Vilmos Apor, bishop of Győr. Two outstanding persons were in charge: as president of the international organization Professor József Cavallier and József Jánosi, a Jesuit priest and the spiritual leader of the organization. Professor Cavallier, descendant of an old French Catholic family, and I shared a strong interest in ecumenical Christianity. For him religious faith related to all suffering humanity. He was an extraordinary colleague; he supported my work fully. A few days after the German occupation he asked me to visit him in the office of MSZKE in the Muzeum Street. I went, and he reported to me then what he had heard from the papal legation on the basis of confidential information from Vatican sources: the entire German timetable relating to the Hungarian Jews. As in other countries, it would also begin here with the revocation of rights, then the wearing of the yellow star, the establishment of a ghetto, and, finally, deportation, the gas chamber, and the crematorium. From Cavallier I heard for the first time about Auschwitz and similar camps. After his shocking revelations he made me promise not to tell anyone what I had heard. He thought that it was essential that I know what was about to happen, but he believed (and I agreed) that for the time being we should not divulge widely what we knew because we could cause a panic in Jewish circles, and we could undermine the opportunities of the organization to help. Later we were not so secretive. As soon as I received the report I informed Géza. But at the time Cavallier told me everything, it was still only about March 21 or 22, the third or fourth day of the German occupation. There was no yellow star, no ghetto; the Sztójay government had just taken control. We could still harbor hope that everything would turn out otherwise than it did. Two days later, at the end of the first week of occupation, Dr. Lajos Kemény, a high-ranking Protestant pastor in Budapest, one of the best and most aggressive supporters of Good Shepherd, asked me for an interview, and on the basis of German sources he told me precisely the same thing that I had learned from Cavallier. At that time I was still young and could sleep well, but in those days my nights changed into sleepless ones . . .

**SZENES:** Let's return to the fact that Géza Soós put the report's German text into your briefcase. What happened then?

**ELIÁS:** I went back to my office at 5 Lázár Street. There was a larger room with eighteen fellow workers, and I had an adjoining small room, separated by a glass wall, for confidential conversations. From time to time others worked here, mainly translators. I called in Mária Székely and asked her to read the German text of the report, to discuss the contents with me, and to let me know whether she could do the translation. Just a few hours later she returned in a terrible state of shock, but exercising self-discipline, she was able to tell to me what she had read. As I listened to her I had the impression that she was not well, and I was quite concerned that she might not have the strength to do the translation. But being a strong person, she accepted the assignment. While she did not feel that she could perform the work in the office, she indicated that her apartment would be suitable. We discussed the form that the completed text should take.

**SZENES:** How long did the translation take?

**ELIÁS:** In seven or eight days she returned with the Hungarian text in six typed copies. Although by this time I was somewhat acquainted with the contents of the report, I read one copy immediately. The closely typed text extended to about thirty-five to forty pages, and, unless my memory fails me, there were also a few simple, roughly sketched drawings of the camp, the crematorium, and the organization of security. The text reported precisely about the functioning of the organized destruction of human beings and provided facts about the masses of people from various countries deported and killed. It was shocking. While the translations were being prepared, Géza got in touch with me and asked me to have Mária Székely take the sixth Hungarian copy, along with the German original, to him at the Foreign Ministry. Only now, thirty-seven years after the events, did I learn that Geza had entrusted Maria to do an English translation as well.

**SZENES:** You were in the possession of five copies of the report. To whom were they addressed and who delivered them?

**ELIÁS:** Cardinal Dr. Jusztinián Serédi was one of the addressees. Upon my request József Cavallier took responsibility for delivery. I took the report to him, and we had a private discussion of the matter. Earlier he had been the international secretary of the council of bishops and the chief editor of the Catholic daily newspaper, and his close relationship with Serédi



allowed him, for all practical purposes, to gain access without knocking. Although he thought it advisable not to make the delivery personally, he guaranteed that he would get the report into the hands of the cardinal. He did, in fact, succeed in this. The second addressee was Bishop Dr. László Ravasz, President of the Universal Congregation of Calvinist Churches, to whom Albert Bereczky, the Pastor at Pozsonyi Street in Budapest, took the report.

**SZENES:** Had Bereczky heard of Auschwitz before?

**ELIÁS:** I do not know, but it is certain that he knew a lot. He suffered a great deal from all sorts of illnesses, but in the terrible months of 1944 he was prepared to do everything with his time, strength, mind, and courage. He was outspoken, not always diplomatic when he was preaching, and if it was necessary, he was even willing to insult others; in saving lives he was more ingenious and inventive than any of us. At the beginning of the German occupation he hid from the Gestapo the leader of the Small Landholder Party, later president of the the republic, Zoltán Tildy, in the church on Pozsonyi Street and in the central office of the Scottish Mission, and elsewhere he hid Gyula Kállai (a leader of the Communist Party), the daughter of Arpád Szakasits (left-wing leader of the Social Democratic Party), and many others. The third copy of the report was addressed to Lutheran Bishop Dr. Sándor Raffay. At my request Pastor Dr. Lajos Kemény, the self-sacrificing supporter of Good Shepherd, took it to him. The fourth copy was directed to the engineer Ottó Komoly, one of the leaders of Jewish public life in our country and of the Hungarian Zionists. After the German occupation he served as director of an assistance group in the Budapest delegation of the International Red Cross; in December 1944 the fascists captured and executed him. At the time of the distribution of the report I knew little about him, and I was cautious in dealing with him. I asked my trusted friend, judge Dr. Géza Kárpáty, to take the report to him. I was careful to choose a person who was not known in church or public life. My friend Géza put on the clothes of the gardener of his villa on Gellért hill--he looked like a laborer of those days. He went to Ottó Komoly like this, without introducing himself at all, and he turned over the mail without any explanation. Later I learned that Ottó Komoly was in contact with the opposition movement, and he reported the reception of the document from an unknown source to Géza Soós. When he learned that it had come to him through the movement, he asked for permission to make copies of the report. I learned from Géza that he was asked to wait for a time, that later copies could be made and distributed. My assumption is justified that

in this way one or two copies of the report could have reached the general public to some degree. There was even the somewhat humorous circumstance that a man who was sympathetic with me and my work came to me and brought me a copy (I have no idea how many times it had been copied) in order to provide me with confidential information. Géza said that he himself would take care of the fifth copy of the report at an appropriate time. The time came when Sándor Török, a distinguished journalist in the early forties, escaped from internment.

**SZENES:** This sounds mysterious; please explain.

**ELIÁS:** The Germans interned Török together with many other intellectuals, but he **escaped** in mid-May.\* A government decree at that time brought the organization of Hungarian Jews [Magyarországi Zsidók Szövetsége] into existence. Török was selected to be a representative of Christian Jews in the administrative committee of this organization. He reported to Cavallier and to me, and he asked for our help. I learned from Géza Soós that the opposition movement took notice of him, and it took steps to help him gain access to the royal residence, to the circle of the deputy regent's widow, Mrs. István Horthy (née Countess Ilona Edelsheim Gyulai), the recipient of the fifth copy of the report, and Sándor Török delivered it to her.

**SZENES:** Why was the countess the addressee?

**ELIÁS:** One of the leaders of the movement, Domonkos Szent-Iványi had been a coworker of Miklós, the Regent Horthy's younger son; he had good connections to the family of the regent as well as to the countess, who was convinced that the Germans had caused the airplane accident involving her husband.\*\* For this and other reasons she was favorably inclined toward being drawn by Szent-Iványi into the opposition movement. Török was chosen for the task of informing the countess and through her, others about the situation of those being persecuted. He was assigned to be the contact person for information from the royal residence.

**SZENES:** Did you get any indication about how the addressees reacted to the report?

**ELIÁS:** The reaction of Cardinal Serédi did not come to my attention. I heard that of Ottó Komoly only in the sense that he asked for permission to make more copies. Bishop Raffay asked only Pastor Lajos Kemény where this text had originated. Török told me that the widow of István Horthy had not inquired about the origins and had had no doubts about its contents. I learned the most about *László* Ravasz; there is even written confirmation of this. Albert Berecky took the report to the bishop on May 12 or 14. The bishop was residing at Leányfalu and was seriously ill. On May 15, the first deportation trains left for Auschwitz from the southern region of the Carpathian Mountains. News about this could not have reached *László* Ravasz unexpectedly: Baron Zsigmond Perényi, president of the upper chamber of the legislature, visited the bishop as early as the end of April and informed him that the rounding up of the Jews from the Carpathian Mountains and Western Hungary was in progress. They were not being taken to work in Germany; their fate would be the same as that of the Polish and Slovakian Jews. This fact motivated *László* Ravasz finally on May 17 to send a petition to Prime Minister Sztójay in the name of the Calvinist Universal Congregation. In the last paragraph he wrote: "It is necessary to draw your Excellency's attention to the sad events that transformed the deportation of Jews in other countries into a final solution . . . ." It was the first occasion that a Hungarian church leader wrote to the prime minister that deportation was equivalent to a "final solution," or *Endlösung*, as the Germans called the mass killing, the genocide.

I have no doubt that Bishop Ravasz composed the petition of the congregation; he knew exactly how to present the facts to the other side so that no one could have doubts that it was getting the message in a suitable manner. Bereczky showed me the text of the petition even before it was sent, and he was very happy that in his text the influence of the report was apparent. He said that the government could not mislead the churches by saying that the Germans were taking the deportees for work assignments. On the other hand, I was happy that with the cooperation of the Good Shepherd Mission the opposition movement was able to achieve its goals through the acquisition of the report, its translation, and delivery. When on May 15, 1944, the first deporting train left the borders, the Auschwitz report, a credible account about their destination, was on the desk of every church leader.

\* In fact, the Hungarian government released Török and allowed him to represent the interests of Christian Jews. Braham, I, p. 451.

\*\* Concerning the airplane accident that had caused the death of Deputy Regent István Horthy see Konrad Matthaedicsz, Egy legenda valósága [The Truth about a Legend]. In: Historia 2 (1982).

## II

### Mária Székely

“... the report is exempt from feeling; the text is dry, . . . inexpressibly dreadful.”

Mária Székely. Deaconess. Her photograph on a somewhat yellowed identification card dated April 7, 1944, with a circular stamp shows a young woman with an attractive face and a serious countenance. The daughter of a prominent dental surgeon, Mária Székely, who spoke several languages and who held a position as bank clerk in 1943 became a volunteer of the Good Shepherd Mission, after the German occupation accepted a position there. Actually, she was never a deaconess, but with this official church designation she could live securely and conceal her real activities. She saved persecuted people; she participated in the organization of homes for children in need of protection and concealment. She forged documents that could save lives; she served as interpreter for the spiritual advisor of the Good Shepherd Mission, and for the International Red Cross delegates she was engaged in difficult negotiations in which the lives of adults as well as children were at stake. She translated from Hungarian and into Hungarian texts and documents that had to be kept secret.

**MÁRIA SZÉKELY (KÜLLŐI-RHORER):** I remember the first reading of the report in the Good Shepherd office in Lázár Street. This is one of those agonizing experiences that I can never forget. This event could have taken place during the last days of April or, more likely, in the early days of May 1944. After so many years I am unable to give the precise date.

**SZENES:** Many who heard news of Auschwitz in the spring or summer, possibly on the basis of the report, did not want to believe that what was happening there was actually possible. Did you believe it?

**SZÉKELY:** This first-hand report was so shocking and staggering that it is impossible to express it in words. Not the least doubt could arise about its truthfulness, but I am not surprised that there were those who did not want to believe it. I felt that I could not succumb to doubts caused by shock and despair. However great the difficulty, I had to concentrate on the translation so that I could complete it as soon as possible. The task that I accepted responsibility for required a total commitment. For six to eight days I worked day and night, and I can say that this work cannot be compared to any other translation assignment that I have ever taken on. In contrast to the trickling news items available, the report revealed the total and terrible reality of the extermination of human beings, organized methodically and pedantically, planned as a crime of massive proportions. I have not been able to blot this out, nor the brutal fact that people who planned and carried this out could sink to such low depths.

**SZENES:** I have seen two contemporary and identical copies of the report. They extend to about forty pages. The translation was certainly a formidable task. Where did you work? After all, this was a prohibited and perilous undertaking, not only for the translator but also for those close to the translator.

**SZÉKELY:** About one month after the German occupation I was able to move to the house of Károly Szladits on Ermelléki Street. This was special for me because in this way I lived only a few minutes away from the office of the Hungarian Delegation to the International Red Cross, where I worked in the summer of 1944. The Szladits family gave me a room in the attic, and this was an ideal place in every respect. I was able to complete the translation work without any interruption. Even dictionaries were available, and Károly Szladits was a great help and supporter with his kindness. He knew that I was working on something important, but he was sensitive and intelligent; he did not expect me to inform him. In this way I was able to type the Hungarian text with my own small typewriter under secure circumstances. I prepared six copies.

**SZENES:** Did the Szladits family not realize that you were occupied with this very distressing matter?

**SZÉKELY:** Because of the dreadfulness of the world around us, my personal feelings probably did not make any impression. Moreover, in that house and in the particular room I occupied many other exciting and distressing events were transpiring; I am thinking of the falsification of

documents in an effort to save lives, as well as meetings and discussions with people about such matters. Even if the family noticed something, no one was inquisitive. **SZENES:** The authors of the report wrote down the organization of the camp, the method of tattooing and selection, and the operation of the gas chamber and the crematorium. You encountered hitherto unfamiliar notions and concepts. How did you come to terms with all this?

**SZÉKELY:** It may seem unbelievable, but this report is exempt from feeling; the text is dry, as if the authors simply wrote about how one should bake bread; I can hardly find the appropriate metaphor without the risk of making light of the matter. I am not saying that it was easy to do the translation, but I did not meet many new expressions or concepts. Of course, that which was expressed was inexpressibly dreadful even in the dry mode of presentation. **SZENES:** How did you copy the illustrations?

**SZÉKELY:** As I recall, it was quite difficult to acquire carbon paper and tracing paper, but at last, despite my lack of talent in drawing, I succeeded in copying and pressing the illustrations through the carbons.

**SZENES:** Cardinal Serédi was the addressee of one copy that you prepared. In the papers of the cardinal archives for the year of 1944 I saw the copy of the Auschwitz report, and the drawings still show the remains of a purple carbon paper. Is it possible that you used this kind of carbon?

**SZÉKELY:** Definitely purple! I am sure of it!

**SZENES:** Then it appears that this copy is the result of your work, but several copies found their way to the cardinal in the course of the summer, and it is impossible to be sure which one ended up in the archives, there is no particular archival designation on it. But how long is it possible to hold such a secret?

**SZÉKELY:** At the time of the translation only a single person saw the report. My fiancé, who has been my husband since 1945, visited me at the Szladits family whenever his work as surgeon and the bombing raids allowed. I did not keep secrets from him. If I had not told and shown him what I had learned from the report, any sincere communication would have been impossible. I remember that he was deathly pale as he read the text ... As you might expect, my work on the

translation was also the cause of dramatic moments, as a result of my own fault, to be sure. It was warm in my room, and I went outside with my papers and dictionary to the ground-level terrace, which was only three to four meters from a loose wire fence. A strong gust of wind came along and caught one page of my German text, including drawings, and it flew against the fence, where it got stuck. On the other side of the fence an armed German soldier was on guard, walking back and forth. On Ermelléki Street the Germans occupied the houses all around the Szladits's home. I became greatly frightened by the loss of my paper, but by the time I got to it, the guard had reached over the fence; he removed it and returned it politely. I was lucky that he showed no interest in the text or the drawing . . . Of course, I went back to my room in order to continue my work.

**SZENES:** At last you produced the Hungarian copies of the text. What happened to them?

**SZÉKELY:** I gave them to József Eliás at his Lázár Street office. He asked me to take a copy of the Hungarian text along with the original German one to Géza Soós in Uri Street near the royal residence. The Foreign Ministry had an office there. The trip was quite adventurous and exciting. I started my trip to the castle from Széna Square, but just then the sirens sounded, indicating an airplane attack. I ran into one of the houses at the square, down into the air-raid shelter. As soon as I started on my way again, there was still another air-raid, but this period in the shelter was short. Finally, up in the castle people were being checked for their papers, and it was certainly a great relief when I finally found Géza Soós and could give him the German and Hungarian texts of the report. He, too, sighed with relief as he took the papers from me ....

**SZENES:** Did you translate the report into English, too?

**SZÉKELY:** Géza Soós gave me this task after I had taken the Hungarian text to him. As I recall, the time allotted was even shorter in this case. The German text was returned to me, and again I worked day and night, and I could not allow my eyes to tire . . . This is something I need hardly explain. Later I heard that somehow suddenly there was an opportunity to get the report to Switzerland; this was the reason for the great rush.

**SZENES:** Did you ever hear what happened to the Hungarian copies?



**SZÉKELY:** About ten years ago the report was treated in an article of the daily paper Népszabadság [The People's Freedom]; my name was mentioned as the translator. From this article I learned that the copies I had translated had been successfully delivered to high-ranking church leaders. In a moving portion of the television series Századunk [Our Century] I heard once again about the report. It was startling to see again the drawings and details of the text projected on the screen and to realize what my work had helped to save as the truth. In May 1981 József Elias telephoned me, recalling the translation of the report. I had not seen Elias since 1949, nor had I heard much about him, but we conversed as if we had just interrupted our conversation of the day before. It seemed strange, almost perplexing, that Jozsi praised me effusively; I want to ward off this praise since, after all, I did what I had to do. Somehow I have always felt that people have the duty to undertake the particular task that they are capable of at any given moment.

**SZENES:** You risked your life by taking on this task ... I would like to ask another question. The literature about Auschwitz is very extensive. Have you read about the camp? Have you had the spiritual strength to take up the topic? Have you visited the camp, by any chance?

**SZÉKELY:** I have read a great deal about Auschwitz and about the Nazi movement in general, from historical and other perspectives. Perhaps I have been interested, above all, because I have been concerned, then as now, about the problem of fascism as a form of spiritual degeneration, a danger that threatens to corrupt man. I have not been to Auschwitz, but at the beginning of the 1960s my husband, children, and I went to Buchenwald. We arrived there from Weimar, and we were struck by the contrast and incompatibility of culture and fascism. My children looked at everything that can be seen there with little comprehension, as if this had happened not on earth but on some other planet.

### III

#### András Zakar

"... the Church must protest at any cost."

Dr. András Zakar, now a retired Catholic clergyman, had an unusual background for one who chose the priesthood for his vocation. Before he began his theological studies, he acquired an engineering degree at the Technical University of Budapest. His career as a priest was unique. He started not a chaplain in a parish but rather as a secretary in the cardinal's residence. Early in the spring 1944, he became the personal secretary of Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi and remained in this position until the cardinal's death, at the end of March 1945. Then for the following three years he became the secretary of the new cardinal, József Mindszenti. Today he is retired in a quiet, small street in a comfortable bachelor's flat among books and manuscripts.

The year during which he served as secretary for Cardinal Serédi was a dramatic one in the life of the country: the German occupation and soon thereafter the liberation by the Red Army took place: The war destroyed the country from east to west. The excerpts from my tape-recorded interview with András Zakar about the events of that year focus on the cardinal's participation in the events of that year, especially on the relationship of the Catholic church to the Jews and the deportations. András Zakar is perhaps the only living witness among those who once worked closely with the cardinal.\*

\* In his review of my book Braham writes about András Zakar: "Rationalizations for Cardinal Serédi's attitude toward the Jews can be found in the interview with Reverend András Zakar, the Cardinal's former secretary. The interview reflects not only his concurrence with the Cardinal's positions, but also his own well-known antipathy toward the Jews. Zakar's anti-Semitic views were fully revealed in his booklet that was published in Switzerland in 1976--*Elhallgatott fejezetek an magyar törtenelemből* (Muzzled Chapters from Hungarian History). In the tradition of the era, Zakar attempted to prove that the Jews and "the talmudists" were responsible for every major tragedy in Hungarian history from the time of the Mohacs disaster in 1526 to the peace treaties that were concluded after World War II. He went as far as to claim that "Jewish forces" were responsible for guiding Admiral Horthy into adopting pro Hitler policies." Randolph L. Braham, "Sándor Szenes, *Befejezetlen múlt.*" *East European Quarterly* 22 (1988), 122.

\* \* \*

**DR. ANDRÁS ZAKAR:** My main task in the service of Cardinal Serédi was to take care of the matters he entrusted to me and to keep in confidence whatever information he gave me. About his activities I can tell you, of course, only what I experienced and how I see it today: I would like to emphasize that reports and information from many sides came to the office of the cardinal, and I was not at all adequately oriented about all aspects of these matters.

**SZENES:** As far as you know, were the cardinal, the bishops, and the priests aware--perhaps through the Vatican--of the fate of Jews in Germany and in occupied Austria?

**ZAKAR:** Without a doubt the bishops and the cardinal at Esztergom were informed about what was happening to the Jews and about the position of the Vatican. In this context we have to regret the fact that the literature on this subject has treated almost exclusively the sufferings of the Jews and the overwhelming agonies and the fateful actions; on the other hand, there is hardly mention the important circular that Pope Pius XI published about the German situation in the spring of 1937, which is generally referred to by its initial words Mit brennender Sorge [With the Greatest Possible Alarm). And this was precisely the alarm signal for the world and above all for Europe to take heed: extraordinary and dangerous events are taking place in Germany. This encyclical was translated into every language. Everywhere, and in our country as well, priests studied and discussed it, held lectures and sermons about it and interpreted it in publications. The encyclical provided a sufficiently correct basic direction for the interpretation of fascism, this new paganism. On the basis of all this we can say that our priests were duly informed about the seriousness of the questions and consequences of the national-socialist ideology and race theory.

**SZENES:** Did the leaders of the Catholic Church have knowledge, for example, about the church's relationship to anti-fascist resistance in countries occupied by the Germans or about the so-called German solution to the Jewish problem?

**ZAKAR:** Information about these matters was available. After all, the French resistance movement was especially famous, and there were quite a few reports about it in the Hungarian press. On the other hand, the actions of the Dutch bishops at that time were instructive for the

Hungarian situation of 1944. A; early as 1944---in other words at a very early stage--the bishops published their letter protesting against the terror and the persecution of the Jews, at a time when the Germans felt very strong and for this reason came down with a drastic strike against the church, which had been spared of persecution up to that time.\*

**SZENES:** Did it occur to the Church leaders and the cardinal that the country could be occupied and that the same fate that befell the Jews in 1940-1942 in other countries could await them here as well?

**ZAKAR:** I concluded on the basis of the cardinal's speeches in parliament and his other pronouncements that he was forced to realize more and more: We must be prepared for this.

**SZENES:** I saw a copy of the Auschwitz report among the papers to 1944 in the archives of Esztergom. Unfortunately, there is no proof of its origin. What do you know about this report?

**ZAKAR:** Cardinal Serédi himself gave me this report when he stayed at Gerecse to rest and work on tasks of special significance.

**SZENES:** When was this?

**ZAKAR:** Well, certainly a month before the distribution of the bishops' pastoral letter of protest, in other words about the end of May 1944.

**SZENES:** Then the cardinal was acquainted with the report at the end of May. Do you know from whom he received it?

**ZAKAR:** Those of us close to the cardinal believed that Miklós Esty, the papal representative (chamberlain) brought it to him.

**SZENES:** When could this have happened?

**ZAKAR:** Most probably in the middle of May.

**SZENES:** Between the tenth and twentieth?

**ZAKAR:** Probably.

**SZENES:** You are acquainted with the interview segment in which József Eliás, Calvinist minister and the former spiritual advisor of the Good Shepherd Mission, related that upon his request József Cavallier took responsibility for finding a trustworthy person to deliver a copy of the report to the cardinal. Do you think that Cavallier could have assigned such a confidential matter to Miklós Esty?

**ZAKAR:** Certainly. Miklós Esty was the deputy director of Catholic Action. Cavallier was well acquainted with him, and they could trust each other without any doubt. If Cavallier took responsibility for getting the report to the cardinal, that simply lends credence to the fact that he considered Miklós Esty the right person to deliver it.

**SZENES:** Did Miklós Esty have the kind of relationship with the cardinal that he could simply give him the document directly?

**ZAKAR:** As a church official highly decorated by the Vatican he was called upon to assume tasks for the cardinal. Moreover, he was an employee of the National Credit Bank, and he advised the cardinal in matters relating to his estate. He had the opportunity to meet the cardinal privately, either in Esztergom or in Budapest, and to hand the report over to him.

**SZENES:** Did they not know about the Auschwitz concentration camp at the office of the cardinal before that time?

**ZAKAR:** Only in the form of rumors, but everybody reacted with skepticism. I remember that I had read the report when I heard the news of the report reaching Switzerland. Those who read it there did not believe it at first and were afraid to print it.

**SZENES:** Was the content so shocking?

**ZAKAR:** Yes, that is how unbelievable it seemed. There are limits to the imagination ....

**SZENES:** About the end of May the cardinal gave you the report that Miklós Esty had given him in the middle of that month.

**ZAKAR:** Yes. After going for a walk together he gave it to me to read and asked for my reaction to it. On the next day I returned it, and I said that it had moved me greatly and that I believed that the church must protest at any cost. To this the cardinal responded: 'yes, I have

already composed the plan of a circular letter that I intend to discuss with the bishops. We will reject this injustice; it has no precedent in the history of the Hungarian nation.

**SZENES:** In the Esztergom archives I read the pastoral letter in a copy by the cardinal's own hand. The cardinal wrote: "I did not use it; I prepared another one." Is this the draft you are talking about?

**ZAKAR:** It is probable that this was the first draft. In the preparation of the final draft, which was completed at the end of June, the archbishops, the representative of the Esztergom vicar general, and a number of bishops.\*

**SZENES:** When he talked to the bishops, did the cardinal mention the Auschwitz report?

**ZAKAR:** No, no. I attribute this to the fact that he was always discreet, even with respect to me, his secretary. His consideration might have been that the Gestapo had an influence on individuals, and by various ways and means could have found out his most guarded secrets. For this reason he concluded that it was safest if he did not talk about them.

**SZENES:** Would it be correct to conclude that he did not inform the bishops of the contents of the report?

**ZAKAR:** It is not probable that he sent it to them in the mail. But it is very likely that in the following conference of bishops he read or he had his secretary read it to the bishops. At that time Gyula Mátrai, the cardinal's chief of staff, was the secretary of the bishops' conference.

**SZENES:** Did he therefore consider the report so important and reliable that he should inform the bishops?

**ZAKAR:** Because he showed it to me, this is what I consider to be the case. In the entire period of my work there this was the only situation in which he showed such a sign of trust, which surprised and made a great impression on me. In other words, if he showed it to me, then it is certain that he informed Bishop Apor and the others.

\* Braham provides the following information about Cardinal Serédi's pastoral letter: "Reverend Görgy Kis, the former pastor of Bakonyszentlászló who now lives in Aurach, Austria, notes that in retrospect it was quite fortunate that the pastoral letter was not read. In his startlingly frank and extremely informative interview, Reverend Kis states *inter alia* (p. 283): "Thus Prince Primate Serédi in June 1944--when the physically and mentally tortured, humiliated, plundered provincial Jews and many tens of thousands of Jewish Christians were removed from the country pressed into cattle cars and by the time of the pastoral letters' appearance most of them were already killed--divides Hungarian Jewry into two parts. The one part is guilty because it exerted a subversive effect on all aspects of Hungarian life, the other part, in turn, sinned with its silence because it "did not stand up against their coreligionists. What follows from this logically? That both parts, that is all of Jewry, are to be condemned." Braham, II, pp. 120-121.

## IV

### Sándor Török

"... the great, dreadful mass murder took place irredeemably ..."

The writer and journalist Sándor Török left Transylvania in the 1920s. He was a laborer; he tried acting; in the course of his life he was an editor or reporter for nine newspapers; he edited radio programs and text books; he published about twenty novels; he wrote children stories about the marvels of Csili-Csala and the adventures of Kőköszi and Bobojsza.

I became acquainted with the painful details of one particular segment of his life through the interview that I prepared, in the course of which we developed a friendship; it was the period of his life between the German occupation and the liberation. In these intense months he was forbidden to continue his work, and he was interned. But then after many complicated efforts in his behalf he was freed and entrusted with an impossible task: he should represent and protect the interests and lives of Christians of Jewish descent against those who intended to kill them. In this particular period he found a great number of people who supported him, sometimes even people he did not know, who helped him to find supportive partners among representatives of the churches and the Red Cross as well as at the royal residence among the members of the regent's family.

What he says is ready to print. He remembers and articulates the way people behaved, the atmosphere, the situations, and the many odd and grim aspects of observed events. After his release from internment in the middle of May he began his activities for the Association of Hungarian Jews; later he became the vice president of the Association of Christian Jews. At the end of May or the beginning of June he had access to the royal residence thanks to the trust of a number of persons close to Mrs. István Horthy, the deputy regent's widow.



\* \* \*

**SÁNDOR TÖRÖK:** So that I could function at all in the interests of Christian Jews I was greatly dependent on the support of the Holy Cross Fellowship, whose patron was Baron Vilmos Apor, the Catholic bishop of Győr; I also needed the support of the Good Shepherd Mission, which stood under Calvinist Bishop László Ravasz. The Lutheran bishop Sándor Raffay also supported me. And behind the bishops there were churches, which I believed to have a voice; at least they should have had a voice. At times it appeared that they wanted and were able to help. I express myself with reservation because I took the matter seriously, and at the beginning I was one of those who believed that we could help a lot. In reality we could accomplish very little. What did we accomplish? For a few individuals we obtained identification cards so that they could move about with greater freedom; for others we created the possibility of escaping singly or with their families. But in the last analysis the entire matter--the deportation, the death marches to Germany, the firing squads on the shore of the Danube, and the executions on the highways, the great, dreadful mass murder with several million victims and everything that accompanied it--occurred, occurred irredeemably . . . But we who worked together at that time, believed that we could help. We worked together in various combinations and connections, and from this network of contact a single thin line led to the royal residence in the castle of Buda. By means of this single thread, the Hungarian Red Cross, I became involved in the discussions that Mrs. István Horthy, the widow of the deceased deputy regent, conducted. Gyula Vállay, the director of the Hungarian Red Cross, and Baroness Gizella Apor, the younger sister of Bishop Apor and voluntary director of nurse's training, enabled me to meet with her.

**SZENES:** Had you been acquainted with Gyula Vállay and Gizella Apor previously?

**TÖRÖK:** I did not know either of them. As a result of my charge I immediately went to the Red Cross, and I requested help. That is when I became acquainted with them. The two of them, but especially Gizella Apor, had made visits to the royal residence. After that at the end of May or the beginning of June they took me along and introduced me to Mrs. Horthy. While in the outside world the events took their course, here in and about the royal residence a strange situation developed: On the one side there was the residence of Angelo Rotta, who helped us a great deal, and on the other side there was the German embassy surrounded by the different offices of its headquarters; here in the center of the royal residence, in the rooms of the widow of

the deputy regent a "conspiratorial" group gathered. I was part of this group, and we discussed and tried to reach a consensus about the news that Mrs. Horthy brought from those close to the regent as well as the news we had brought from the outside world. Of course, in order to understand what went on, one must imagine, at the same time, the strange situation that was characterized by danger, complexity, lies, attempts to help, attacks, and confusion that affected those who lived in the royal residence and from which they could not isolate themselves. For example, I had the task of calling Mrs. Horthy every day for several weeks on a special phone number, and after introducing myself as the "bookbinder Bardócz" I asked if she had any work for me. If she said that there was a bookbinding job, I could go safely to get the news or to discuss what would have to be done in a certain matter.

**SZENES:** Who actually belonged to this group?

**TÖRÖK:** I know of the following individuals: Gizella Apor, Gyula Vallay, József Cavallier, Father Jánosi, and I. I was there four or five times together with Mrs. Horthy, but unless my memory fails me, Jánosi and Cavallier were not present every time. In addition, I went there several times as Bardacz the bookbinder.

**SZENES:** Who thought up the conspiratorial idea of Bardócz?

**TÖRÖK:** Gizella Apor, most likely.

**SZENES:** We are talking about the summer of 1944. What was the atmosphere and mood in the regent's residence? How could you interpret this?

**TÖRÖK:** What one could see revealed a great deal. At the royal residence, for example, there were two kinds of guards. There were those in full dress, radiant--the Middle Ages--an honor guard with capes, helmets, and halberdiers, performing routine changes of guard. Then there were the more genuine bodyguards, those who stood at the door and in uniforms, decorated with braids. In the inner courtyard, there were guards sitting on benches, and if a general or anyone belonging to the regent's family drove across, then this unit lined up to salute. But on the square directly opposite the court guards, a German tank and a line of German guards stared right back. They observed what was going on at the regent's residence, and I believe that they knew a lot. Gizella Apor, Vallay, and I had to go up into the residence from the side of the Elizabeth

Memorial Museum through a small side entrance, and then we saw bodyguards in green uniforms with machine guns posted in what I believe to have been a naively vulnerable position. They protected the residence. . . . The people I met there all knew that the war would end with a German defeat. They were afraid of the Germans and did not respect them, but at the same time they were somehow helpless, hesitating, and paralyzed in their presence. They would have liked most of all to surrender to the British. But where were the British? This was naive dreaming. Horthy and those around him did not know, or did not want to accept, that the Soviet forces would drive the Germans out of Hungary.

**SZENES:** I can imagine that this must have been a topic of discussion, since the Soviet army was approaching the Carpathian Mountains on the Rumanian border.

**TÖRÖK:** This topic was hardly treated at all, and if it was, only marginally when there was talk about the news from the eastern front.

**SZENES:** What was the main topic of your discussions?

**TÖRÖK:** For the most part we talked about the intentions of the Germans and the defense against them. We talked about the situation of the Jews, the deportations, and the measures that would probably be used against them. These discussions had a serious tone; there were no digressions or jokes. There was no small talk. In general, the ultimate questions had to do with the stand we should take in this or that matter, who would take on which tasks, and who would assume responsibility for how much.

**SZENES:** What could you tell them?

**TÖRÖK:** I reported on the situation of the Jews in Pest and about the consequences of the recent decrees. There was a new decree against the Jews every day. I reported about the brutality of the authorities, about its atrocities, and the news I received about the deportations from the countryside. I had a few ideas about how one could ease the misery. I asked for advice, and we discussed who could try to achieve what with the aid of connections.

**SZENES:** Was it possible to achieve anything?

**TÖRÖK:** Nothing of great import; only one or two small contributions. For example, we brought an organization of Jewish physicians into being. It consisted of thirty to forty doctors. We were able to get them German identification cards that allowed them to move about even after the usual curfew for Jews. With the aid of forged identification cards a few of them were even able to disappear from the view of the authorities. Among the people, especially among the children packed into houses with Jewish stars, many were sick. There was a great deal of misery among these persecuted people. Almost every kind of work to earn money was either forbidden or severely limited, and the authorities took the men who were capable of working from the families to work camps. Many people needed clothes, food, medication and money. The Holy Cross Society, the Good Shepherd Mission, and the Red Cross were able to help in these areas and had a certain degree of freedom to help, even if only within strictly controlled areas. I was deeply moved by the humanity and behavior of those who met in the circle of Mrs. Horthy. But still do not forget: In the final analysis, what happened to the Jews *did* happen.

**SZENES:** József Eliás told me that you took one copy of the Auschwitz report to Mrs. Horthy.

**TÖRÖK:** When the Auschwitz report came into my hands, I took it to the Foreign Ministry and gave it to an official, an under-secretary of state. He was not an important person. I gave it to him and requested that he transmit it to the regent. He looked at it and turned a few pages and said that this was Jewish hysteria. He believed that he understood the reasons for it. The Jews were too sensitive and blew things out of proportion. I could see that from this person the report would not get any further. In agreement with Vállay and Gizella Apor, I communicated to Horthy through Mrs. Horthy.

**SZENES:** Why did you first go to an insignificant official if you had the chance to get to Horthy immediately?

**TÖRÖK:** I believed that Horthy would be more likely to put faith in the report

if it were sent to him from the foreign ministry. Don't forget that this official was not the only one who considered the reports about gas chambers and crematoria Jewish scare tactics and rumors.

**SZENES:** That is true. Accordingly, at the end of May or the beginning of June the Auschwitz report reached Miklos Horthy by means of the Eliás-Török-Vállay-Baroness Apor-Mrs. Horthy chain.

**TOROK:** Yes, that's how it happened. Later I heard from Mrs. Horthy about Regent Horthy's reaction to the report: He accepted all of it as the truth.\*\*

**SZENES:** Perhaps you know that Horthy published his memoirs in Buenos Aires in 1953, and in them says: "I learned only in August through secret messengers about the horrible reality of the death camps."\*\*\*

**TÖRÖK:** I heard about the memoirs. What Horthy writes is not true. At the beginning of the summer those of us who met at the royal residence spoke about matters as if all of us were aware of the Auschwitz report. What is more, after I had transmitted it to Horthy, I had the impression that this was not the first copy in the hands of the regent and that the Jewish leaders and perhaps even László Ravasz had gotten it to him.

**SZENES:** This is possible. I imagine that Mrs. István Horthy, Gizella Apor, and Vállay had read the report. Did you discuss it with them?

**TÖRÖK:** Not in detail. At this time the young Mrs. Horthy and many others were guided by two considerations: compassion and shame. And they also asked themselves what the West would think if we helped the Germans by throwing several hundred thousand people over to them.

**SZENES:** During that summer you met many representatives of churches as well

as people from other countries. Was this your general impression?

**TÖRÖK:** Yes, I had this impression from almost everyone to whom I turned for help. I visited Calvinist Bishop László Ravasz as well. People often referred to him as a "Calvinist Jesuit." What they meant was that he was very cultured and intelligent. He was seriously ill and was forced to receive me from his sick bed in Leányfalu. I sat next to him. We talked, and suddenly he started to cry. He hid his head in the pillows and cried out: I did not want this, I did not want this! I had told him about the situation in the country (which he was aware of anyway), and I made a reference to the Auschwitz report, and then he started to cry.

**SZENES:** Did he have reason to say that he did not want this?

**TÖRÖK:** He had reason. He belonged to the right-wing church leaders of considerable influence. He not only swam with the current, but for many, especially for the believers, he was, as the highest official of the Calvinist church, an impressive communicator, and influential preacher of the word, the stream itself.\*

**SZENES:** And Cardinal Serédi? I read in a study of church history that you as the administrative chief of the Association of Christian Jews had constant contact with him.

**TÖRÖK:** This is an exaggeration. But I did actually visit him on two occasions. I had a plan, and I discussed it with József Cavallier and Father Jánosi. The three of us thought that perhaps Cardinal Serédi could do

something. Cavallier and Jánosi asked for an audience, and at the appointed time all three of us went to see him.\*

**SZENES:** In Esztergom?

**TÖRÖK:** No, in the castle at Buda. That was the residence of the highest ranking church leader of Hungary. When I consider with what amazingly serious ceremony the whole event took place, when the cardinal appeared in our circle . . . The three of us stood there in the waiting room, on one side of me the international president of the Holy Cross Society, Cavallier, and on the other side the spiritual leader of the same organization, a Jesuit priest. The highest official of the church entered and held out his ring for a kiss. We lowered ourselves to our knees and kissed the ring. After that the cardinal sat down on a small bench, and Father Janosi announced that Mr. Török had a proposal, and they, the priest as a representative of his society and Cavallier as a representative of his organization, approved of what I was about to present. The cardinal made a signal, and I proceeded to make my statement. I said that I had information about the measures of the Protestant head of the church against citizens (gendarmes, policemen, public officials, railroad workers, etc.) who aid the Germans in rounding up Jews, members of the Resistance, and leftists would not be allowed to receive the Lord's Supper. For a believing Protestant this is a shockingly severe spiritual punishment. There is an appropriate expression of this in Hungarian church circles: He who does not approach the table of the Lord with pure spirit, "brings about his damnation as he drinks wine and eats bread." I asked the cardinal whether there was a possibility of announcing something like this, for this would have a great impact on Catholics and on others as well. I asked this in the name of those I represented and in the name of mankind, humanity, and God's. The cardinal listened for a long time. There was tension in the air when he finally spoke: "If the pope himself does not undertake anything against Hitler, what can I do in my more restricted circle of influence? Hell!" He tore his little biretta from his head and threw it on the ground. Then he reached down for it slowly, put it back on his head, and said, more quietly: "Please excuse me ..." This was my first meeting with Jusztinián Serédi. He could not accept my petition. He wanted to but could not. This is how he dismissed me.

**SZENES:** At the end of June the pope requested the cardinal through the Nuncius Angelo Rotta to make a public protest against the persecution of the Jews.

**TÖRÖK:** Yes, I was aware of this. He had received us before that request came from the pope. Otherwise he would not have said what he did. Later I saw him once more, again with Father Jánosi and József Cavallier. This could have been in the beginning of June. We received news that Jews from Budapest would also be deported. The city was filled with gendarmes from the countryside. The three of us stood again in front of the cardinal, and I asked him to help so that we could at least save the children. I asked him to intervene, to take them into his protection in order to take them to some neutral country, Switzerland or Sweden. He conducted negotiations with the International Red Cross about this, but I wanted to convince him to take some action, to have him intervene and use his influence. The cardinal responded to my pleas: If he could do anything, he would do it, but the Germans would thwart his plans anyway. Then the sirens sounded, which meant that a bombing attack was starting, and we went down into the basement of the cardinal's residence. The cardinal sank down to his knees to his place of prayer in the air-raid shelter with Cavallier and Jánosi behind him, also kneeling to pray. The air raid lasted two hours, and the cardinal prayed during the entire time. This was the last time I saw him . . . On the basis of these meetings I felt that Serédi was a man of good will, but passive. He would have been prepared to help in part strictly on the basis of humanitarian motives and, on the other hand, as a Catholic, but ... in the last analysis, he "cannot do anything."

**SZENES:** You wrote once that three of you--you, Mrs. Horthy, and Baroness Apor--went to Angelo Rotta's for a secret meeting in the night. What was the urgent reason for this?

**TÖRÖK:** This happened at the beginning of July, when extremely alarming news reached us: The deportation of the Jews from Budapest was about to begin.

**SZENES:** What kind of impressions did you have of Rotta?

**TÖRÖK:** He was an intelligent, sober, and reassuring discussion partner. There was something in Rotta's relationship with me that I also observed with Mrs. Horthy and Baroness Apor. They would have preferred to minimize the tragedy of the Jews for my sake, to conceal the true seriousness of the situation, and they tried to console me: "Things will turn out in the end . . ." But deep down they did not believe this.

**SZENES:** After the liberation you worked in radio. One of the topics you treated in a program called *Sunday Conversations* was: Do we have to recall these times and events? At a time so



close to the horrible crimes of fascism this was a relevant topic. How would you answer this question today?

**TÖRÖK:** In those *Sunday Conversations* Marcell Benedek was my partner. At that time both of us said that we had to engrave onto our memories everything that happened and the fact that it could happen at all. I believe that today. By means of the propaganda of hate, it is possible to excite the masses to an uninhibited use of force and organized violence. Unfortunately, if the favorable situation exists, somewhere in the world a variant of genocide could occur again.

\* Bishop Ravasz's speech in support of anti-Jewish legislation in the Hungarian parliament in 1938 confirms Török's statements about the political views and importance of the Calvinist bishop. Ravasz said at that time: "It is my conviction that this law serves not only the peace and security of our country but also the interests of those who oppose it with fervor (I recognize their full right to do this) ... I would have preferred that the (Jews) themselves could have realized a long time ago that there cannot be a minority within a state that practices the rights of the majority." Szenes, *Befejezetlen múlt.* pp. 94-95.

\*\* Mrs. István Horthy confirmed in a conversation of 1984 the accuracy of Török's account. She said that she herself took the report to Horthy, and she witnessed Horthy's shock upon reading the report. Cf. Szenes, *Befejezetlen múlt.* pp. 214-215.

\*\*\* Miklós Horthy, *Memoirs* (London: Hutchison, 1956), p. 219. Horthy completed and first published his memoirs in 1953, when he was eighty-five years old. He gave an earlier date for his first encounter with the Auschwitz report in an affidavit signed on May 27, 1947, during an interrogation in connection with the Nurnberg trials. Then he stated that he learned of the extermination of the Jews and Auschwitz about the end of June ("gegen Ende Juni 1944, als ich ausführliche Berichte von Vernichtungslager Auschwitz bekam." Quoted by Fenyő from NA Record Group 238, World War II War Crimes Records. National Archives. Mario D. Fenyő, *Hitler. Horthy and Hungary. German-Hungarian Relations 1941-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 194-195. To be sure, even late June would have been about one month after Török actually delivered the report.