# Details on the ecclesiastical history of Várpalota

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#### ABSTRACT

Várpalota is known to be a 'socialist town' by common people and historians as well. There were industrial improvements and influx of thousands labourers. The town's other, non-economical, side is a bit neglected. This side is the connection between citizens and their churches. A few respected catholic families were considered to be relocated by force, which happened a year later.

This thesis describes the relation of the citizens of Várpalota to their churches from 1945 to 1956. Case of Vicar Antoine Steixner was paramount for anti-religious forces. This case was coincident with the resettlements by force. Communist dictatorship revealed its face again.

KEYWORDS: communism, socialist town, church

## Introduction

Várpalota is known as a 'socialist' town by the general public and by historians as well.<sup>1</sup> There was much focus on industrial development and on an influx of thousands of labourers, and thus another aspect of society, a non-economic one, did not receive such attention. This dimension is the connection between the church and its believers. The following industrial sites existed before the Second World War: coal mines in Várpalota, an oil refinery, and the Nitrogen synthetic air saltpetre factory in Pét. Investments from the Socialist era

<sup>1</sup> Paul Germuska lists Várpalota as a socialist town among Ajka, Dunaújváros, Kazincbarcika, Komló, Oroszlány, Ózd, Salgótarján, Százhalombatta, Tatabánya and Tiszaújváros. Germuska 2004, 51.

include distillers in Pét, a petrol cracking factory, a power station in Inota and the aluminium forge. Várpalota was one of the most important social engineering sites of the Communist dictatorship. Signs of the town's importance are indicated by its development from a village into a town after amalgamating with Inota.<sup>2</sup>

Villagers had to leave their homes because of the forced collectivisation, and some of this labour force was absorbed by the industry in Várpalota. This brought changes to the milieu of the town. The demographic increase went hand in hand with a transformation of the labour situation and with deteriorating housing and social affairs. There were difficulties in public distribution too. Subject to less scrutiny is how these changes affected spiritual life in the town, and how the populace related to churches. This is a delicate matter since the bedrock of the emerging Communist dictatorship was anti-clericalism, and they had an anti-religious agenda. Marxism did not acknowledge that religion may be a private matter. The anti-religious and anti-clerical agenda was part of the class struggle.<sup>3</sup> There were various tools supporting church persecution. Although freedom of religion was embedded in the Stalinist constitution, the anti-clerical propaganda was harsh, and innocent priests were tried and convicted publicly. Church persecution was manifested by abolishing convents and Catholic institutions, and nationalising ecclesiastical schools for instance. Furthermore, those attending religious lessons were spied upon and harassed. The clergy of Várpalota, i.e. Monsignor Anton Zsédely and Anton Steixner, were deported, and respected Catholic families were forcibly resettled.<sup>4</sup>

## **Research method**

I outline the relationship between the churches of Várpalota and their believers before the Second World War, and then between 1945 and 1956. An interesting question is how the massive industrialisation affected the town that already had industrial traditions. Did the resettled labour force change how the locals perceived their churches? What was the effect of the massive anti-religious propaganda? This study focuses on the prelude to and possible reasons for the mass deportation in 1952, and the detailed investigation against Monsignor Anton Steixner, vicar of the town.

Studies were conducted in the Archives of Veszprem County and in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security. Statistical data and related literature were processed as well. The status, living conditions, housing and social situation of the workers were examined in several articles at that time. Researchers analysed issues of labour disci-

<sup>2</sup> Decree 5.203-2/1951 (X.18) B.M.

<sup>3</sup> Kahler 2005, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Resettled by force, read more in Bank 2004.

pline<sup>5</sup>, which were manifestations of difficulties, and public supplies bordering on catastrophe.<sup>6</sup> Researchers also paid attention to the new emerging dominant elite.<sup>7</sup> Religious life and the predicament of the local vicarages remained in the shadows, fewer studies dealt with this matter as it was deemed less important. Some part of this vacuum was filled by Ildiko Kriza, who wrote an essay on the Calvinist vicarage of Pétfürdő.<sup>8</sup> Béla Bányai wrote an essay still waiting to be printed on the Lutheran Church in Várpalota.<sup>9</sup> Paul Huszár compiled the history of all parishes in Várpalota between 1850 and 1950.<sup>10</sup> Memoirs of Rezső Szíj regarding the topic were printed in a book entitled 'The Sociography of Várpalota' in 1997.<sup>11</sup> These works described the life of parishes in Várpalota until 1950. Events after 1950, like the Revolution in 1956 and the aftermath, were only mentioned in the essays of Kriza and Szíj. My two earlier essays dealt with the Christian trade union and its leader, John Eperjesi<sup>12</sup>. My two essays are important preludes to this thesis. The first essay dealt with John Eperjesi, the second one focused on the stages of the church persecution by the Communist dictatorship in Várpalota.<sup>13</sup> (The second essay was just an outline, so it did not go into detail on the run-up to Monsignor Anton Steixner's arrest. There were other particulars left out such as presumable reasons and the relation to the forced resettlement of other Catholic inhabitants.

## Results

Three parts of Várpalota were not united before the Second World War: Várpalota, Pét and Inota. They differed in terms of structure and labour force, although the economic connections are undeniable. The society of the three towns is diverse. Inota had a strong agricultural sector, the majority of Pétfürdő worked in factories established in the 1930s, while Pétfürdő only had 142 inhabitants in 1930. By 1940, the population of the village had grown to 1,000 people. The population increase can only be the result of a resettled labour force. There was a census in Várpalota in 1910, and the population was 5,540 inhabitants. The religious denominations were 3,107 Roman Catholic, 5 Greek Catholic 2 Eastern Orthodox, 1,118 Lutheran, 812 Calvinist, 2 Unitarian and 394 Jews. By 1940 the population had in-

<sup>5</sup> Szűts 2012b.

<sup>6</sup> Szűts 2012a.

<sup>7</sup> Cserős 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Kriza 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Bányai [s.a.]

<sup>10</sup> Huszár 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Szíj 1960 (1997).

<sup>12</sup> Galambos 2012

<sup>13</sup> Galambos 2013.

creased to 8,807. The religious denominations were 6,212 Roman Catholic, 79 Greek Catholic, 13 Eastern Orthodox, 1,141 Lutheran 1,139 Calvinist, 2 Unitarian, 211 Jews and twelve others.<sup>14</sup> The population growth became steady after the Second World War (diagram 1).

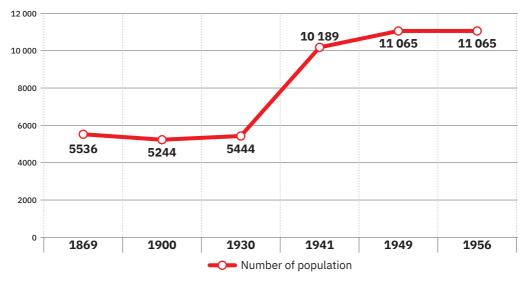


Diagram 1. Change in Várpalota population, 1900–1956

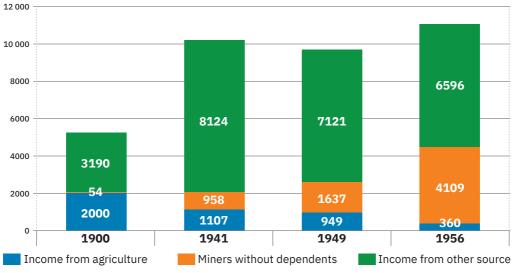
Source: in Galambos I. 2016, based on Ila – Kovacsics 1964; Szíj 1960 (1997)

The main income for an average town dweller in Várpalota came from agriculture: the proportion of farm labourers to miners was 2000:54. Mining started in 1876. Várpalota had a briquette factory from 1914. The number of farmers declined to 1,809, whereas miners increased nine-fold to 446. The area of arable land decreased because of the industrialisation. This consisted of open pit mining and the slag area left by the factories in Pét. In the fifties, more priority was given to industry: aluminium forges in Inota, 7<sup>th</sup> of November Nitrogen Power Station in Pét and the coal mines in Várpalota. All of these enterprises grew, thereby narrowing the scope for agriculture. 5,703 hectares were suitable for agriculture in Várpalota in 1930. Types of land appropriate for agriculture: 1,883 hectares of arable land (33%), 1,475 hectares of pasture (25.9%), 1,071 hectares of forestry, vineyards, gardens and reeds (18.8%). The rest was unsuitable for agriculture (22.3%). There were only 3,078 hectares suitable for agriculture in and around Várpalota and Inota by 1958. A well-known historian of Várpalota, Rezső Szíj, put forward at least two reasons for this. The first was industrialisation. The second was that a large amount of land was separated from the towns; the Communist agricul-

<sup>14</sup> MKL, Várpalota article

tural cooperative<sup>15</sup> in Küngös especially had a large share. Only 1,756 of 2,875 hectares were cultivated in 1956. By comparison, 1,883 hectares were arable land in 1940. As time elapsed, less and less land was used for cultivation. The reason for this could be that the number of farmers was in sharp decline. There were 2,000 farmers in Várpalota in 1900. By 1958 there were only 360 of them. The following spreadsheet illustrates the steady drop in farmers. The speed of decline increased at the time of the Socialist industrialisation<sup>16</sup> (diagram 2). Inota was not immune to the change in labour structure. Várpalota had 720 farmers, Inota had 387, the overall total being 1,107. Sixty of Inota's farmers were miners as well.<sup>17</sup>

**Diagram 2.** Change in labour force ratios: farmers, miners and other occupations between 1900 and 1956



Source: Galambos I., based on Ila – Kovacsics 1964; Szíj 1960 (1997), Kiss (1990)18

The population of Pétfürdő increased the most. Thanks to this and Monsignor Anton Steixner, Pétfürdő was given an independent parish during the Second World War. A church consecrated to Saint László was built as well. Pét's Calvinist community became a parish too in 1943. The Second World War prevented the Calvinists from erecting their own church.<sup>19</sup>

- 17 Ila Kovacsics 1964, 322.
- 18 Kiss 1990.
- 19 Kriza 2001, 67.

<sup>15</sup> The word-for-word translation is "productive cooperative", which does not reveal the brute force the Communists used for farmers to give up their land and become an employee of the corporation.

<sup>16</sup> Szíj 1960 (1997), 132.

According to the report of the German Headquarters, Várpalota was conquered by Soviet forces on 21 March 1945. This date is the anniversary of the first Communist dictatorship in Hungary. Soviet forces attacked from multiple directions, and both armies suffered great losses in the street fights.<sup>20</sup> The fighting was prolonged in Várpalota in 1945, and the inhabitants sought shelter in the coal mines. Monsignor Anton Steixner slept in the mines between 20 December 1944 and 14 January 1945. Even the Christmas mass was celebrated in the mines. Some masses of the Christmas festivities were held in the mines as well. Monsignor Anton Steixner went to the church to celebrate mass.<sup>21</sup> Pétfürdő was targeted by 3,000 bombs. These bombs destroyed the factories producing military hardware and the new block of flats.<sup>22</sup> This part was the most developed area of Pétfürdő between the two world wars. Two-thirds of the town's buildings were damaged, burnt out or collapsed, thus the town became a heap of rubble. 511 people died and 186 were injured because of the bombings and fighting. There was no medicine, food or other tradable goods. Livestock was driven away, and large parts of the grain stock were destroyed. The Nitrogen factory in Pét was unable to produce anything due to bombings and missing machines transported to West. Only the mine was 'intact', but it was out of order too since there was no electricity.<sup>23</sup> The electricity was provided by its own mini power plant. Most of the public service buildings were demolished, including the hospital and town hall. Both Catholic churches were destroyed. The one in the middle of the town was burned down by an incendiary bomb. Schools, the Erzsébet and Crown hotels, the local building society, the pharmacy, the almshouse and 457 detached houses were destroyed.<sup>24</sup> The church tower, the bells and their timber base were blasted by a shell, the stained windows were shattered into pieces by the blast, the main door was torn down, even the walls were shelled. Holy artefacts and some of the banners were intentionally destroyed. Important papers of the Roman Catholic parish in Várpalota were intentionally torched. The papers were stored in the monastery of the Daughters of Charity, whose building was also bombarded.<sup>25</sup> The Lutheran Church building was damaged too, and nearly ruined in 1945. Its tower was hit three times by mortars, thus the window shutters finished not long before were smashed. The south part of the church roof was hit twice, and some beams were broken, but the inside of the church remained almost intact. Only the Lutheran school was not badly damaged: the windows were just broken and the roof was damaged.<sup>26</sup> Not all the suffering and losses were the result of warfare in the town. The Red Army committed several atrocities. Ferenc Bátor, former judge,

- 20 Veress D. 2000, 149.
- 21 Huszár 2000, 47.
- 22 Kriza 2001, 68.
- 23 Köncöl 1988, 26.
- 24 Szíj 1960, 202.
- 25 Huszár 2000, 47.
- 26 Bányai [s.a.] 4.

was beaten so badly that he died a week later. According to the memories of Antal Báthory, public security ceased to exist because of the robbing and violent behaviour of the Soviet forces in the town. People feared the violent, plundering Soviet soldiers. For example, the pretty wife of Ferenc Riszterm, a shepherd, was dragged into a Soviet truck and taken away. When she was thrown out of the truck, she was dead.<sup>27</sup>

Public security improved after the front left the area. This amelioration was due to the police officers working in the Police Headquarters of Veszprém County. They delegated officers to maintain public order in Várpalota.<sup>28</sup> Although 60-70 percent of the town was in ruins, the rebuilding work did not start immediately owing to the fact that the town having petitioned for a rebuilding loan did not get it. Regional politician, Ferenc Harák, complained in 1946 that the town received only 10,000 forints from the required 200,000. The sum of local work taxes was 30-40,000 forints. One tenth would have been sufficient to start the rebuilding process.<sup>29</sup> Although Várpalota had a high ratio of industrial labourers compared to other municipalities in the county, and Ferenc Harák and István Borzas Sr. initiated the organisation of the Hungarian Communist Party, these two facts did not help the Communists to a parliamentary seat in 1945. The Independent Farmers Party won the election. Várpalota belonged to Veszprém County. In this county, the Independent Farmers Party had 59.3 percent of the votes, the Communist Party had 18.2 percent, while the Social-democrats obtained 13.5 percent.<sup>30</sup> The Communist Party did not fare better in 1947. György Farkas, leader of the Barankovics party, had a meeting with Monsignor Anton Steixner in Várpalota before the 1947 election, and Farkas reported that the bishop of Veszprém, László Bánáss, supported the party's agenda. Farkas intended to nominate Antal Bátor, 34, for the seat. Bátor was wellknown from KALOT<sup>31</sup>. Farkas wanted to discuss the aforementioned matter with Monsignor Anton Steixner, as Monsignor Anton Steixner supported the candidate. Thus Farkas visited Bátor at his home, but Bátor rejected the candidacy. Bátor advised that his brother Mt Imre Bátor should run for the seat. Imre Bátor was elected.<sup>32</sup> After all other parties were dismantled and the Social-Democrats were amalgamated into the Communist Party<sup>33</sup> it became more evident that there was a shift from a kind of democracy to a popular democracy, i.e. to the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>34</sup> The dictatorship of the proletariat denied and threatened core values of the Hungarian people like private property, national independence and

32 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 21

34 Gyarmati et al. 1998, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Fakász 1993, 21–22.

<sup>28</sup> MNL OL XIX. B-1-az 216.139/1946.IV./12. B. M.

<sup>29</sup> Archives of the Hungarian Parliament 1945 IV. 923.

<sup>30</sup> Sukerek 1970, 335.

<sup>31</sup> Catholic Young Men's Association.

<sup>33</sup> Their new name was the Hungarian Workers' Party.

free practice of religion.<sup>35</sup> The most spectacular evidence of this is the forced nationalisation of the religious schools. In Várpalota there were Roman Catholic schools, the Roman Catholic school for girls was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Calvinists and Lutherans had their own educational institutions as well.<sup>36</sup> The Roman Catholic school employed ten teachers, and the students numbered 576.<sup>37</sup> There were nationwide protests against forced nationalisation. The vicar, Monsignor Anton Steixner, summoned the parish representatives and expounded on the bishop's announcement regarding the matter of forced nationalisation, asking those present to sign a protest telegram sent to the minister of culture. The telegram was worded jointly, and the vicar went into detail in the church as well. This act was subsequently defined as 'agitation among ordinary church folk'<sup>38</sup>. After the forced nationalisation there were two schools for primary education, a school for boys and another one for girls.<sup>39</sup> Communist ideology was implemented in the curriculum of these schools.

During the forced nationalisation, Monsignor Anton Steixner attracted the attention of the political police (ÁVO).<sup>40</sup> They started collecting data against Monsignor Anton Steixner. Their term for this was 'processing'. The centenary of the Hungarian revolution in 1848 was celebrated in 1948. Every municipality had its own festivities. The Communist Party successfully exploited these occasions to propagate its own ideas. The organisation of the festivities was aided with advice, pre-printed scripts and anthologies. One of the books printed in 1943 became an official narration. This book was the 'Four Hundred Years of Struggle for an Independent Hungary' written by Aladár Mód, who was a steadfast combatant for the Communist Party. The bell tolled during the 1948 festivities in Várpalota. This fact was one piece of information that could be used against Monsignor Anton Steixner. The case study prepared<sup>41</sup> in 1949 contained few incriminatory details. "Monsignor Anton Steixner reads the letters of archbishop Mindszenty with corrections. Before each occasion, Monsignor Anton Steixner shows the letter to the police chief. Monsignor Anton Steixner did not agitate against the Communist Party either during the election or during the forced nationalisation. Monsignor Anton Steixner is said to agitate in secret for the Popular Party among believers. [...] Monsignor Anton Steixner was strictly silent during the arrest of archbishop Mindszenty. [...]Monsignor Anton Steixner's private ethics are unquestionable. Monsignor Anton Steixner is known to meet with women in his home, but this fact needs corroborating. Monsignor Anton Steixner drinks beverages modestly. His salary is

- 36 Pacsuné Fodor 1991, 56-63
- 37 MKL Várpalota article.
- 38 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 21.
- 39 Pacsuné Fodor 1991, 63.
- 40 This organisation was closer to the Gestapo than MI6.
- 41 Case study against Monsignor Anton Steixner Veszprém, 19 January 1949. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 37–38.

<sup>35</sup> M. Kiss 2012, 16.

380 forints. His parish has 23 hectares of field and 13 hectares of arable land, which are lent to local farmers. The parish has 1,436 square meters of vineyard cultivated by Monsignor Anton Steixner. Monsignor Anton Steixner never preaches against the Communist party state. However, his chaplain does this job for him. Monsignor Anton Steixner wants to be seen as a democrat by the leftist milieu. Monsignor Anton Steixner is proud of his origins, the lower class of farmers. His origin predestines him to be the priest of the working class." The Communist political police did not classify Monsignor Anton Steixner's activity as agitation during the forced nationalisation. His silence was emphasised in the study case. Years later, the Communist political police stated the diametrically opposite. Anonymous accusations may have been delivered, reports may have been filed from social connections or agents. These contained malice as well. Evidence for malicious lies is that Monsignor Anton Steixner meets women in his home. This fact needed corroboration. Fornication is a frequent charge against priests that is rarely proven.

Voluntary informers and agents of the political police had every intention to supply details. This one was recorded as well: "Before the Easter of 1949, Monsignor Anton Steixner said in the church every evening: 'This is a nasty world although God created it beautiful. I would not be nasty, but men made the world nasty.' Another incriminatory statement from a student whose mother was also an informant is: "When Martin Gulyás, a 19-year-old student, drew a five-pointed star on the board, Monsignor Anton Steixner supposedly remarked that this is the star of Communists and apes. This story diametrically opposes Monsignor Anton Steixner's behaviour depicted in the case study. Thus the credibility of the story is low. Reports were filed on the meetings where Monsignor Anton Steixner and his friends came together in the parish or at somebody's home. The timing of these meetings was emphasised since archbishop Mindszenty was arrested at this time. This moment was exaggerated as a conspiracy in the eyes of the political police. It was their specific choice that evidence of these data be shown in the summer of 1951, a few weeks before Várpalota became a town. Sándor Gáspár, Pál Tóth, Ferenc Szőke and Lajos Somogyi reported these meetings to the political police. The shutters were closed and the radio was always on during these meetings. They supposedly listened to Voice of America<sup>42</sup> or the radio was on so their voices could not be heard outside. Their last meeting that at least I know of was on 26 July 1951. Ferenc Kégli and László Bölcs were there. They left the priest's house at 23.00. They were seen by Sándor Gáspár, Pál Tóth and Ferenc Szőke. The ladies left the meeting, which focused on the education of the people when Ferenc Kégli and László Bölcs were leaving the priest's house. It was confirmed that two weeks earlier there was a meeting at the priest's house. The participants were László Bölcs, Ernő Gógli and Joseph Vass. Their departure was witnessed by Lajos Somogyi, who was leaving the MNDSZ.43

<sup>42</sup> A capital sin in Communist Hungary.

<sup>43</sup> Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women, Comprehensive report on Monsignor Anton Steixner, Veszprém, 20 June 1952. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 29–30.

Case studies were drawn on prominent Catholics who went to friendly gatherings. Cornelius Jean, a vet, moved to Várpalota in 1938 where he earned the respect of the townspeople. His case study<sup>44</sup> highlighted: 'He has close relations with the Catholic clergy and Ferenc Kégli, a leader in the party administration of Kádárta, previously a notary in Várpalota, with Joseph Vámosi, officer at the railways, László Bölcs and Joseph Deák, officers in the mines, with Ernő Gógli, engineer in the mines, and with László Haraszti, a bail bondsman. Another report stated that Cornelius Jean had a private car and gave lifts to the priests of Várpalota, Csószpuszta, and Tés. Their destination was not clear. It is confirmed that the nuns of the parish and the priest visited Cornelius Jean's house. He took the priest to Lake Balaton.<sup>45</sup> A case study was made on Joseph Vámosi,<sup>46</sup> a cashier at the railway station, and on Ferenc Kégli, a former notary in Várpalota. "The aforementioned person was the head notary in Várpalota before the war until the formation of the councils. He was not a member of any political party. [...] Ferenc Kégli's relation to the Soviet Union is deplorable, but he is supportive of clerics. He and his wife regularly attend masses. He takes the sacrament of confession and communion. [...] I was informed that Ferenc Kégli will be dismissed from his leadership position in the party administration of Kádárta<sup>747</sup> Jenő Homolya and László Bölcs were charged with maintaining relations with the vicar of Várpalota. Jenő Homolya<sup>48</sup> was an affluent spice merchant whose shop was forcibly nationalised without compensation. László Bölcs has a strong affinity to the Catholic Church. He and his family attend mass every morning. He visits the meetings held at the vicar's house.<sup>49</sup>

Some incriminatory facts in these files had a special feature. They were the family visitations. The political police tried to prove that the nuns visiting families were involved in agitation against the Communist Party on orders from the vicar. The nuns were also rumoured to be agitating against agricultural cooperatives<sup>50</sup> and for slowing the work in the mines, i.e. sabotage. Thus the vicar seemed to share the workload. The nuns were used for agitation purposes. The nuns' presence in the region is dangerous for the Communist Party and for the people, according to the Communist Party's information. Nuns agitated against the forming of the agricultural cooperatives in the 'Upper-town' district. Thus the formation of the agricultural cooperative has faced difficulties.<sup>51</sup> Another incriminating fact was that the vicar withheld nuns after the dissolution of the monastic orders. This meant that the vicar gave shelter and work to whom he could. Five nuns lived in my house: Anna Jung,

51 Report on Monsignor Anton Frick Veszprém, 22 February 1952. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 53

<sup>44</sup> Case study on Cornelius Jean, Veszprém, 26 July 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Report, Veszprém, 26 July 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 42

<sup>46</sup> Case study on Joseph Vámosi, Veszprém, 26 July 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Case study on Ferenc Kégli Veszprém, July 26. 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 47

<sup>48</sup> Case study on Jenő Homolya Veszprém, July 26. 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 49

<sup>49</sup> Case study on László Bölcs Veszprém, July 26. 1951. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 50

<sup>50</sup> Farmers were coerced to offer their land for the agricultural cooperative without compensation.

70, Elisabeth Buza, 50, former dean, Rosalie Balogh, 80, Róza Kardos, 34, and Sára Kóbor. Nuns Róza Kardos and Sára Kóbor were employed by the parish from 1949 until the end of 1951. Nuns Róza Kardos and Sára Kóbor had the task of visiting families.<sup>52</sup> The families were visited on the first and fifteenth day of each month. The nuns' task was to collect taxes for the church. Agitation by the nuns was the easiest way to explain the problems, such as the low popularity of the agricultural cooperative and the mine falling behind in its production schedule. These were the reasons why the charges stated that the nuns - who were just collecting church tax – were agitating against the Communist Party. These allegations had an unwanted side-effect. Since the political police were interested in the activity of the nuns, researchers have a faint idea about the relation between the Catholic Church and its believers in 1951. From this time there are a few sources on the topic. The number of family visits was 1,400-1,500. Thus the nuns reached about 4,200-4,500 people if an average family had three members. The nuns only visited Catholic families. The town's population was 11,056. It is fair to say that the Catholic Church reached out to half of the populace at least once a year. In terms of occupations among the 1500 families, there were 800 miners, 500 farmers, 100 intelligentsia and 100 small entrepreneurs. Despite the large numbers, the political police were unable to prove that the family visitations hindered production in the mines. Later, other charges became more important. The political police believed that advertising religious education constituted agitation, and charged nun Elisabeth Buza, 50, former dean, for visiting families on the pretence of begging, and agitating against the formation of agricultural cooperation. Várpalota was said to be under the influence of the clerics due to the activity of the nuns according to the political police. Their proof was that 500 people attended the recent procession. The social structure of those in attendance was 40 percent farmers, 60 percent miners and other industrial workers.<sup>53</sup>

Incriminatory data was gathered by the summer of 1951, but the political police took action a year later. Monsignor Anton Steixner's arrest was connected to the forced deportation in Várpalota. During the arrest, some respected Catholics and their families were deported (Cornelius Jean, Jenő Homolya and Ferenc Kégli). Their deportation was used to break the society in Várpalota, forcing farmers into agricultural cooperatives<sup>54</sup>, repressing religious life and emptying buildings important to communist clerks. Monsignor Anton Steixner's arrest and suffering aimed to repress religious life. Since Várpalota and Inota were united, the town administration needed empty buildings, which became free after the deportation. The leader of the Communist Party in Várpalota, John Sáfár wrote a top-secret request to the county's Communist Party, asking for deportation. All the deportees, Ferenc Kégli, Alexander Gátfi and

<sup>52</sup> Note on the interrogation of Monsignor Anton Steixner Budapest, 6 July 1952. ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 61

Conclusive report on Monsignor Anton Steixner Budapest 20 July 1952. ABTL 3.1.9. V-101925.
30.

<sup>54</sup> Fakász 1993, 16.

Jenő Homolya, had valuable real estate<sup>55</sup>, and Sáfár wanted these real estates for himself and the Communist Party. 33 people were deported with Monsignor Anton Steixner. Cornelius Jean, a vet, Ferenc Kégli, and John Zima were among the deportees. Ferenc Kégli's house was selected a year before. John Zima was the local head of the Social-democratic Party. This may have been the cause for his deportation. The deportees were transported to Hortobágy or Recsk<sup>56</sup>. There were eight children among the deportees. The deportees were rehabilitated by the town of Várpalota in 1990.<sup>57</sup> Várpalota was declared an area where inhabitants need permission to live by the order of the Council of Ministers in 1951, which was modified in 1954<sup>58</sup>. There were similar areas in Hungary such as Budapest, Miskolc, Komló, and the City of Stalin (today Dunaújváros). Thus deportees required permission to move back.<sup>59</sup>

Monsignor Anton Steixner was not deported because the political police gathered incriminatory data against him. He faced criminal charges. The trial may have had a lead on sabotage action based on the collected data and the interrogation. Zoltán Esztó was charged with the most incredible sabotage actions in 1952. Zoltán Esztó worked in the mines as an engineer.<sup>60</sup> Labour shortage was a serious matter in the mines in Várpalota. Unskilled and slave labour did not improve efficiency significantly, thus the mines fell behind the plans. Zoltán Esztó's arrest and the deportation happened at the same time, and Monsignor Anton Steixner was incarcerated as well. Zoltán Esztó's house was searched in July 1952. A report on the search highlighted a valuable camera.<sup>61</sup> After a report stated that Zoltán Esztó did not have firm Communist ideas and he was fond of clerics – although his family life is stable – an investigation was launched. Several charges were concocted during the inquiry. One of them was that Zoltán Esztó did not install the F/4 mining machine for four months. Zoltán Esztó told the cell agent that this machine is too big for the mines in Várpalota and the machine had killed a miner in another mine.<sup>62</sup>

Monsignor Anton Steixner's house was also searched on 1 July 1952, where nothing incriminatory was found, as was in the case of Zoltán Esztó. Lieutenant Endre Somogyi prepared the plan for investigation. The person charged is supposed to tell the story of his life – this must include any party membership of his family and himself, supposed hostile actions, his friends and meetings with his friends. Monsignor Anton Steixner was interrogated first in Budapest on 2 July 1952. The interrogation went as planned. Monsignor Anton Steixner said that he came from a farmer family, who had a little land, he graduated

- 59 MNL OL XIX. B-1-az 602/1955 I. M.
- 60 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-110208/42.
- 61 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-110208/42. 14.
- 62 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-110208/42. 25–26

<sup>55</sup> MNL VeML XXIII. 627.b. 1. box. 107/1957. paper.

<sup>56</sup> A concentration camp used to mass murder inmates.

<sup>57</sup> Order of the Town Council 21/1990. /VIII.31./

<sup>58</sup> MNL OL XIX. B-1-az 2-3592/1954

from a technology college. He was ordained in 1926. He had been the vicar of Várpalota since 1939. There were odd paragraphs in his interrogation. These paragraphs are so incriminatory that Monsignor Anton Steixner is believed not to have said them without any outside coercion. "I was not a member of any political party. I admit that I had good relations with a German colonel Joseph Mueller in 1944. Several German priests in uniform lived in my house. I gave my house to these German commissioned officers for rent. I admit that I had hostile feelings towards the Soviet Union because I was raised in the Horthy-regime and I am a nationalist. I emphasised in my homilies that everybody should defend their homeland in order to be saved from the Russians. I read Bishop Stephen Haász's letter in the parish of Várpalota, a letter which was anti Soviet.<sup>63</sup> Although this information with the case of his brother, who was supposed to be a member of the Volksbund, appears in the summary, it did not emerge in the charge. After the interrogation, the political police found it necessary to collect Monsignor Anton Steixner's preaching and those speeches, which were against the forced nationalisation of church schools.

Another investigation plan was prepared on 10 July 1953. This one focused on family visits and friendly meetings. A case of US dollars appeared. This became the real charge." Monsignor Anton Steixner and his chaplains and the former nuns agitated against the Hungarian People's Republic among many people in Várpalota. Nuns visited 1,400-1,500 families a year. Nuns appeared in miners' homes pretending that they were begging for money. Then they asked questions about the miners' labour morale. These occasions were used for agitation purposes based on the Voice of America. Since 1948 kulaks – elements of Horthy's regime and right-wing people – had gathered at Monsignor Anton Steixner's home at night, and left Monsignor Anton Steixner's home late at night (sic). Monsignor Anton Steixner has relations with several mining engineers. Monsignor Anton Steixner agitated against the forced nationalisation of schools and sent a protest to the minister of culture. Monsignor Anton Steixner had been receiving US dollars from America from Margaret Dóra, the dollars were confiscated.<sup>64</sup> Ms. Anna Steixner's home was searched in Veszprém on 8 July 1952. In this house, 41 dollars were found. This and the previous 1 dollar were the basis for a lousy prosecution. Dollars were sent from an old believer, Ms. Margaret Dóra from the United States. The charge was that Monsignor Anton Steixner did not offer the money for the National Bank of Hungary to buy. At this time the main direction of the investigation was anti-democratic activity. Finally, the prosecution settled for currency abuse, a crime which was codified in 1950. Monsignor Anton Steixner was sentenced to one-year imprisonment and was banned from civic affairs for three years on 21 October 1952, the anniversary of Várpalota becoming a town.<sup>65</sup> Naturally, the money was confiscated.

<sup>63</sup> Note on the interrogation of Monsignor Anton Steixner Budapest ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 21.

<sup>64</sup> Plan for interrogation, 10 July 1952

<sup>65</sup> ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-101925. 129.

Monsignor Anton Steixner's suffering was not unique in Várpalota, since Monsignor Anton Zsédely, the vicar of Pétfürdő, was detained on 6 October 1955. He was charged with conspiracy.<sup>66</sup> He was forced to work in the slave labour camp of Csolnok. He was set free during the revolution of 1956. The people of Várpalota stood firmly for the free practice of religion. Their stance got firmer during the revolution of 1956. George Nagy initiated a Christian trade union with John Eperjesi. Nagy also negotiated with the chaplain of Várpalota and with George Kubinyi on the matter of forming a Christian Democratic People's Party. Their plans did not materialise because the Revolutionary Council rejected the idea.<sup>67</sup> The increase in pupils signing up for religious lessons is another sign of support for the Christian faith. The Executive Committee of the town council of Várpalota made a decision on 1 December 1956 that religious education would be held after school hours, and those who want to attend should stay in school.<sup>68</sup> There were 781 students attending religious lessons on 4 September 1957. This signalled a 150-percent increase compared to the previous year, which meant one third of the pupils of Várpalota attended religious classes. This number was too much for the Committee. The Committee managed to decrease the number to 524 by 15 September, a number close to the previous year. The Executive Committee of the town council of Várpalota sadly stated that they were not able to provide enough room to hold the religious lessons in Várpalota.<sup>69</sup>

## Summary

Várpalota is known as a 'socialist' town by the general public and by historians as well. There was much focus on industrial development and on an influx of thousands of labourers, and thus another aspect of society, a non-economic one, did not receive such attention. This dimension is the connection between the church and its believers. The following industrial sites existed before the Second World War: coal mines in Várpalota, an oil refinery, and the Nitrogen synthetic air saltpetre factory in Pét. Investments from the Socialist era include distillers in Pét, a petrol cracking factory, a power station in Inota and the aluminium forge. Várpalota was one of the most important social engineering sites of the Communist dictatorship. Signs of the importance of the town are indicated by its development from a village into a town on 21 October 1951 after amalgamating with Inota, which was cut off from Fejér County.

<sup>66</sup> ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-140095.

<sup>67</sup> MNL VeML XXV. 151 B.10100/1959 (46<sup>th</sup> box), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Records on the Executive Committee of the town council of Várpalota 1 December 1956 MNL VeML XXIII. 627.

<sup>69</sup> Records on the Executive Committee of the town council of Várpalota 1 March 1958 MNL VeML XXIII. 627.

Villagers had to leave their homes because of the forced collectivisation, and some of this labour force was absorbed by the industry in Várpalota. This brought changes to the milieu of the town. The demographic increase went hand in hand with a transformation of the labour situation and with deteriorating housing and social affairs. There were difficulties in public distribution too. Subject to less scrutiny is how these changes affected spiritual life in the town, and how the populace related to churches. There were various tools facilitating church persecution. Although freedom of religion was embedded in the Stalinist constitution, the anti-clerical propaganda was harsh, and innocent priests were tried and convicted publicly. Church persecution was manifested by abolishing convents and Catholic institutions, and nationalising ecclesiastical schools. Furthermore, those attending religious lessons were spied upon and harassed. The clergy of Várpalota were deported and respected Catholic families were forcibly resettled.

An interesting question is how the massive industrialisation affected the town that already had industrial traditions. Did the resettled labour force change how the locals perceived their churches? What was the effect of the massive anti-religious propaganda? This study focuses on the prelude to and possible reasons for the mass deportation in 1952, and the detailed investigation against Monsignor Anton Steixner, vicar of the town. Monsignor Anton Steixner's arrest was connected to the forced deportation in Várpalota. Detectives were looking for a crime for the sentence. Monsignor Anton Steixner was sentenced for concocted accusations on the anniversary of Várpalota becoming a town. Monsignor Anton Zsédely, the vicar of Pétfürdő, was detained in 1955. He was forced to work at the mine of Csolnok as an inmate. He was liberated by the revolution of 1956. The people of Várpalota stood for Christian values: they wanted to establish the Christian-Democratic People's Party and organise a Christian trade union.

The number of those attending religious lessons was higher than before the revolution, and too much for the Committee. The Executive Committee of the town council of Várpalota sadly stated that they were not able to provide enough room to hold the religious lessons in Várpalota. The dictatorship of the proletariat showed its true colours again.

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## KIVONAT

# Adatok Várpalota egyháztörténetéhez

Várpalota "szocialista városként" él a köztudatban és a történeti szakirodalomban. Az iparfejlesztés lépései, a munkások ezreinek beáramlása mellett viszonylag kevesebb figyelmet kap a helyi társadalom másik, nem gazdasági dimenziója, a lakosság és egyházközségek kapcsolatának elemzése. A proletárdiktatúra egyházellenes lépései közül kiemelkedik dr. Steixner Antal esperes-plébános ügye, amely egy időben történt és szoros összefüggésben állt a várpalotai kitelepítésekkel. A proletárdiktatúra ismét megmutatta az igazi arcát.

KULCSSZAVAK: kommunizmus, szocialista város, egyház