

## HELL ON EARTH IN HUNGARY UNDER COMMUNISM: THE VÁC PENITENTIARY AND PRISON IN THE 1950S

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**Abstract:** *In my study I describe a dark chapter in the history of Hungary in the 1950s, the tragic conditions in the Vác Penitentiary and Prison and the violence and cruelty of the authorities towards political prisoners. In 1948, communists took power in Hungary and the Stalinist dictatorship that had taken over the country put hundreds of thousands of innocent victims behind bars, interned them or deported them to forced accommodations. Vác, one of Hungary's largest prisons, it was a horror of a place until the 1956 revolution, with many dying behind bars because of torture and ill-treatment, but survivors carried the traumas of their experiences for the rest of their lives. At the end of this article, I will look at the former prisoners of Vác who are buried in the Vác prison cemetery, the events of the revolution in prison, and the re-imprisonments after the revolution was crushed, and the prisoners' hunger strike of 1960. The situation of political prisoners in Hungary was not different from that of political prisoners in other Eastern European countries belonging to the communist bloc (e.g. Poland, Czechoslovakia, GDR, Romania, Bulgaria).*

**Keywords:** Vác Penitentiary and Prison, communism, 1950s, political prisoner, torture, Doberdó, prison cemetery.

In 1948, communist takeover took place in Hungary, and the Stalinist totalitarian dictatorship led by Mátyás Rákosi<sup>1</sup>, General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party and later of the Hungarian Working People's Party, brought unbridled repression and terror to the Hungarian people. Soon the punishment camps and prisons were filled to overflowing, where the innocent people who had been brought here were tortured and humiliated without restraint and without mercy. This is one of the darkest chapters in Hungary's 20th century history. The communist takeover, the "year of the turnaround" in 1948, also marked the most tragic period in Hungarian prison life. While in Western societies, after the Second World War, a renewal of justice began with the relaxation of penal policy, in Hungary the Stalinist penal policy dictated by the Soviet Union was a false doctrine of the escalating "class struggle" and the exercise of power by the "proletariat dictatorship", which was based on the oppression of the minority in opposition to the majority. The consequences of paranoid penal policy have plunged the justice system to the nadir of its modern history. The political powers of

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<sup>1</sup> Rákosi, Mátyás (1892-1971) communist politician, General Secretary (later: First Secretary) of the Hungarian Communist Party (1945-1958) and Hungarian Working People's Party (1948-1956). Prime Minister of Hungary (1952-1953).

this era used criminal law and prison as a radical tool of “brainwashing”. From 1948, the year of the turnaround, until 1956, Hungarian criminal law was distorted into a directly controlled instrument of state policy, which, although it represented on paper modern and sound principles, in practice served as a bulwark of “class struggle”, to teach a lesson to those who opposed the “building of socialism”. This eight-year period, unprecedented in our modern history, resulted in most of the centuries-old guarantees of criminal law being violated and hundreds of thousands of people becoming the prey of a sick criminal power.<sup>2</sup>

According to the research of historian Lajos Izsák<sup>3</sup>, between 1950 and the first quarter of 1953, about 650,000 people were prosecuted, of whom 387,000 were convicted. Prison was the most common punishment, accounting for about 75 percent of convictions. To completely usurp power, Rákosi and his group ruthlessly pushed aside those who could in any way have been an obstacle to the exercise of their power. The criminal law and prison became a kind of “hand whip” of power, whose function was to enforce the breakneck pace of industrialisation for war purposes and to secure the “hinterland” through mass collectivisation and “kulak” persecution.<sup>4</sup>

From the summer of 1950, the State Protection Authority (hereinafter: ÁVH) took over the 2nd and 3rd floors of the Markó Street Prison of Budapest, from January 1951 the Pest Prison (Gyorskocsi Street), in May of the same year the Budapest National Prison, then the Vác Prison and finally the Sátoraljaújhely Prison, where only political prisoners were housed. The old guards were replaced by ÁVH guards, and from then on endless beatings and punishments were the order of the day. According to eyewitnesses’ recollections, the rations - a litre of soup three times a day and 25 decagram of bread - were on a par with those in the Nazi death camps. The prisoners were dressed in striped clothes, their heads shaved, and their names replaced by numbers. All contact with the outside world was cut off, no correspondence, no visits, no parcels were allowed, and for three years relatives of many prisoners received no information whatsoever. Food standards were reduced to

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<sup>2</sup> Lőrincz József, Mezey Barna, *A magyar börtönügy története*, (The history of the Hungarian prison affairs), Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019, [https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12925/A\\_magyar\\_bortonyug\\_tortenete\\_2019.pdf?sequence=6](https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12925/A_magyar_bortonyug_tortenete_2019.pdf?sequence=6), accessed on 14.02.2022., p. 132-133.

<sup>3</sup> Izsák, Lajos (1943-) historian, university professor.

<sup>4</sup> Izsák Lajos, *Magyarország a II. világháború után (1944–1956)*, (Hungary after the Second World War, 1944-1956), in Pölöskei Ferenc – Gergely Jenő – Izsák Lajos (eds.), *20. századi magyar történelem (1900–1994)*, Budapest, Korona Kiadó, 2001, p. 311.

such an extent that many of the prisoners resembled the emaciated prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps within a few months.

Following Stalin's death (5 March 1953), the Rákosi group was temporarily weakened because of shifts in power within the Soviet leadership. In a timid reassessment of the previous criminal policy, a general pardon was declared on 25 July 1953. However, this was implemented slowly and partially, and by December 1953 the number of prisoners had been reduced by barely two thousand. In 1954, during the premiership of Imre Nagy<sup>5</sup>, before the third congress of the Hungarian Working People's Party (MDP) in the spring, the review of political sentences was given a new impetus, the result of which was that by the end of the year the prison population had been reduced more significantly, to about 50,000. The easing of the treatment of political prisoners was first felt from July 1953. From then on, the brutality of the ÁVH guards eased somewhat, many of them realising that their power was finite and that they would have to answer for their abuses. The turn of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956, which exposed the Stalinist cult of personality, sealed the political fate of the Rákosi group. The release of the wrongfully imprisoned and the rehabilitation of the wrongfully convicted accelerated from July 1956, when Rákosi left power. Release commissions appeared in the various places of enforcement and released those sentenced to non-life imprisonment for war and anti-people offences, the small-holders, the social-democrats, the priests, those convicted of economic offences and those convicted of attempting to cross the border illegally. On September 1, 1956, we have approximate data on the detention of 30,000 persons in various penitentiary facilities.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the same cruelty and ruthlessness that prevailed in Vác and other prisons and jails in Hungary (e.g. Szeged, Máriaosztra, several Budapest prisons) was also present in the GULAG and GUPVI camps of the Stalinist Soviet Union, where millions of innocent people were dragged off to "malenky robot". Also in prisons and labour camps in the

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<sup>5</sup> Nagy, Imre (1896-1958) communist politician, MP, Minister of Agriculture (1944-1945), Minister of the Interior (1945-1946), Speaker of the National Assembly (1947-1949), Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary (1953-1955, 1956).

<sup>6</sup> Lőrincz József, Mezey Barna, *A magyar börtönügy története*, (The history of the Hungarian prison affairs), Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019, [https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12925/A\\_magyar\\_bortonugy\\_tortenete\\_2019.pdf?sequence=6](https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/12925/A_magyar_bortonugy_tortenete_2019.pdf?sequence=6), accessed on 14.02.2022., p. 133-134.

communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe, such as in Poland (e.g. Rawicz, Wronki), Czechoslovakia (e.g. Pankrác, Jáchymov), the GDR (e.g. Berlin-Höhenschönhausen), Romania (e.g. Jilava, Gherla, Pitești), Bulgaria (e.g. Belene), Albania (e.g. Spac) and Yugoslavia (e.g. Goli Otok), the conditions and fate of political prisoners were not dissimilar to those of prisoners in the Hungarian “hell on earth”.

### **Prison world in Hungary**

After 1948, practically the entire Hungarian middle class was condemned to ruin and partial annihilation in a systematic exclusion of intellectuals capable of resistance. By 1951, the old, “unreliable” state administration, local government, legal, military, police and prison staff had been dismissed, most of them interned, deported from their families and many of them were sent to forced labour camps or prisons. To replace the “cadres” who were thus made redundant, fast-track classes were organised. Judges and prosecutors were trained at the one-year legal academy set up for this purpose. The illiterates were given a year to complete the first year of primary school before being allowed to enrol at the academy. After two years, an illiterate person could become a judge handing out death sentences at will. A similar solution was found for replacing missing prison guards. Here, too, only reliable “cadres” were allowed to apply, and they were made prison guards after a few weeks of intensive training. As there were no rules at all on how prisoners were to be held until a 1955 government decree, prison guards were free to do with prisoners as they pleased. The guiding principle of the quick lectures and stencilled leaflets was: “Don’t just guard, hate!” For example, Prince Pál Esterházy<sup>7</sup>, once Hungary’s most powerful landlord, who was imprisoned in Vác, was regularly beaten by prison guards. A very poor child turned prisoner later said: “I beat him because it gave me pleasure. When I was a child, I could never have imagined that I could beat a prince.” In the same place, the elderly historian and former minister Bálint Hóman<sup>8</sup>, who was found “too fat” by the prison guards, was forced to run up and down the stairs and tortured until he died.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Esterházy, Pál (1901-1989) prince, landlord, philanthropist.

<sup>8</sup> Hóman, Bálint (1885-1951) historian, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, politician, MP, Minister of Religion and Public Education of Hungary (1932-1938, 1939-1942).

<sup>9</sup> Bertók T. László, “Börtöntörténelem – Az elítélt gyűlölete és a pasztoráció. *Vertem, mert élvezetet okozott*” (Prison history - Prisoner hatred and pastoral care. “I beat because it gave me pleasure”), in *Magyar Nemzet*, 2021.12.04, 17:00,

István Fehérváry<sup>10</sup>, publicist and university professor, was imprisoned in Vác prison in the early 1950s. Since 2001, as President of the Political Prisoners' Association, he has been collecting data from those times. His research shows that over a ten-year period between 1945 and 1956, more than 700,000 people were arrested, interned, or deported to labour camps. If we also consider the number of common criminals, which must have been between 300 and 400 thousand during this period, we have a staggering statistic: Every tenth citizen of Hungary was in prison during these years! On average, 150,000 people were imprisoned every year, with the lowest figures in 1946-1947 and 1955-1956, and the highest in 1950-1954. Reports show that 200,000 people were behind bars and wire fences in 1952. A staggering number of prisons, interrogation and judicial institutions were set up to hold this huge mass of people. The ÁVH alone numbered over 80,000 people, and if the police are included, the total number of public security and state defence forces in the country exceeded 120,000. The state spent more on maintaining this dizzying prison world than on social expenditure. Mass arrests were a serious loss to the country's economy, costing the population billions of forints a year. Fehérváry said: "The guilty were the youth, who demanded humanity and freedom, the church, which spoke out for the free education and practice of religion. The guilty were the 'kulaks' who clung to the land inherited from their ancestors, the workers who protested against the introduction of an inhuman system of norms and competition, the intellectuals who refused to fully accept the ideology of communism. The dictatorship condemned the representatives and employees of the pre-war regime, those involved in childish plotting, those who failed to denounce, the founders of secret political parties, those who distributed leaflets, the organisers of armed groups, those who painted anti-communist slogans on the walls of suburbs. It was considered an anti-state activity to try to flee the country, and death for being found armed. In time, their own 'comrades' were also targeted, and the builders and operators of the infernal system ended up in the prisons they had built themselves, or disappeared

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<https://magyarnemzet.hu/lugas-rovat/2021/12/vertem-mert-elvezetet-okozott>, accessed on 21.02.2022.

<sup>10</sup> Fehérváry, István (1925-2014) publicist, university professor.

without a trace, on the principle of ‘the Moor has done his duty, the Moor can go’”.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Vác Penitentiary and Prison**

In Hungary, imprisonment as a form of punishment became commonplace relatively late, in the middle of the 19th century, compared to developed European countries. After the 1870s, Hungary began to develop legislation and institutions that were modern by European standards, and as a result, by the first decades of the 20th century, the system and organisation of Hungarian prisons that exist and function to this day had been essentially established. The Vác Penitentiary and Prison, established 167 years ago, was and still is one of the key elements of this system. First, I will briefly outline the history of the building. Kristóf Migazzi<sup>12</sup>, Archbishop of Vienna and Bishop of Vác, was responsible for setting up an institution in the city, based on the guidance of Péter Pázmány<sup>13</sup>, to educate the sons of the impoverished noble classes. He entrusted the education of young people to the Piarist order. In 1765, construction began on the site of the present prison on the old cemetery, next to the Arch of Triumph, combining the headquarters of the Order of Mercy with the home of the ‘deserved’ priests. The institute was finally set up under the care of Maria Theresa<sup>14</sup> (1767), modelled on the Theresianum in Vienna, under the same name “Theresianum”, in accordance with the principles of the gymnasium and the academy, and the educational principles and curriculum were defined. This curriculum became the basis for the first Ratio Educationis. After the construction was completed, the school year of 1777/78 began in the new building with 75 students of the Theresianum. The school had also a library. In September 1784, Joseph II<sup>15</sup> closed the Theresianum and auctioned off its lavish equipment. In 1806, during the wars with the French, the building was used as a military hospital.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Mező Éva, “*Százszázrek elveszített évtizedei. Az ötvenes évek börtönvilágáról a politikai elítéltek még hallgatnak*” (Decades of hundreds of thousands lost. Political prisoners are still silent about the prison life of the fifties), in *Fejér Megyei Hírlap*, 2005. Sept. 17, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Migazzi, Kristóf (1714-1803) Roman Catholic priest, Bishop of Vác, Prince-Archbishop of Vienna.

<sup>13</sup> Pázmány, Péter (1570-1637) Roman Catholic priest, Jesuit philosopher, theologian, cardinal, Archbishop of Esztergom.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Theresa (1717-1780) Archduchess of Austria, Queen of Hungary and Croatia (1740-1780), Queen of Bohemia (1743-1780), Holy Roman Empress (1745-1765).

<sup>15</sup> Joseph II (1741-1790) Holy Roman Emperor 1765-1790).

Following the defeat of the War of Independence in 1848-1849, the Austrian Imperial Penal Code was enacted in Hungary in 1852. The code essentially made imprisonment the main punishment. In order to implement the provisions of the code, prisons had to be built cheaply and quickly. To this end, forts and other public buildings were converted into prisons between 1854 and 1858. The Pest County Penitentiary was moved to Vác, within the walls of the institute once built by Maria Theresa and Kristóf Migazzi as an educational institute for noble youths. The first inmates were admitted on 20 November 1855 to the 600-seat prison, which was in fact a penitentiary. The plans for the conversion and construction of 1885 were drawn up by Ferenc Sontheitl<sup>16</sup> in 1878, but the extension and conversion of the Vác National Prison building was eventually carried out by the architect Gyula Wagner<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, the building on the banks of the Danube was constructed to house the prisoners, forming a single block with the housing blocks. In 1884, it was again converted into a penitentiary. The prison hospital, for many years Hungary's most modern medical institution, was also completed here in 1931.<sup>18</sup>

A comprehensive study on the prison's history also points out that many of the political prisoners who have spent their punishment in here were well-known party leaders, clerics and public figures. Alongside the names of János Kádár<sup>19</sup>, Árpád Göncz<sup>20</sup>, István Bibó<sup>21</sup>, Cardinal József Mindszenty<sup>22</sup>, Attila Gérecz<sup>23</sup>, Bálint Hóman, there is also the name of Szilveszter Matuska<sup>24</sup>, a terrorist viaduct bomber, who was released in 1944 when the Russian troops arrived, allegedly thanks to his

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<sup>16</sup> Sontheitl, Ferenc (?-?) architect.

<sup>17</sup> Wagner, Gyula (1851-1937) architect.

<sup>18</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Az intézet története* (Official website of Vác Prison and Penitentiary. History of the institution), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-az-intezet-tortenete>, accessed on 26.01.2018.

<sup>19</sup> Kádár, János (1912-1989) communist politician, MP, Minister of the Interior (1948-1950), First Secretary (later: General Secretary) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (1956-1985), Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary (1956-1958, 1961-1965).

<sup>20</sup> Göncz, Árpád (1922-2015) writer, translator, politician, MP, President of Hungary (1990-2000).

<sup>21</sup> Bibó, István (1911-1979) lawyer, political theorist, university professor, politician, Minister of State for the Hungarian National Government in 1956.

<sup>22</sup> Mindszenty, József (1892-1975) Roman Catholic priest, Prince Primate, Archbishop of Esztergom (1945-1973), cardinal.

<sup>23</sup> Gérecz, Attila (1929-1956) poet, sportsman, freedom fighter.

<sup>24</sup> Matuska, Szilveszter (1892-1945?) teacher, military officer, terrorist.

persuasive powers, and then took up a leading position in the Police Station of Vác, from where he disappeared two days later for good.<sup>25</sup>

### **The „Doberdó”**

In this chapter, I present the most notorious section of the prison, the so-called “Doberdó”. The Doberdó was built in 1855 as the prison's disciplinary section. The building itself - its layout and atmosphere - and the legends that still live today bear witness to its role. On the Italian front of the First World War, the Doberdó plateau and the village of Doberdó were the epitome of wartime suffering, and the Hungarian soldiers, who had served in the war and who later became, for one reason or another, residents of the prison, named the former prison's disciplinary section “Doberdó”. The name has not changed over the years. In its current state, only one wing of the L-shaped enclosure can be seen, the other part has been walled in.

One of the striking features of the Doberdó is the windowless standing cell, the idea being that the prisoner locked in there could only stand due to the lack of space. He could not squat, sit down or otherwise rest his body. If he became unwell or fainted, he was unable to assume the posture necessary to normalise blood circulation and, even if he survived, suffered permanent damage to his health due to the disruption of blood supply to the brain. The standing cell and the dark cell in the Doberdó were a means of breaking the will. The prisoner in dark cell lost his sense of time and space within a short period of time, and the cortical lesions caused by the lack of stimuli led to the appearance of false memories, i.e., hallucinations. Many of the former political prisoners claimed that dark cell was not so unbearable if the prisoner had not been beaten too severely before being placed in dark cell, if he was 'at peace with himself', if he was able to overcome his emotions, to organise his thoughts and to focus on a single subject. There was certainly one advantage, and that was that those in dark cell could eat every day, if not much. There were times when, at mealtimes, the prisoners had to line up in the corridor by the cell door. They were lined up against the wall so that the big toe of each foot touched the wall. In this position, they

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<sup>25</sup> Kollár Roland, Zatykó Anikó, “*A váci fegyház és börtön múltja és jelene*” (The Past and present of the Vác Penitentiary and Prison), in *Börtönügyi Szemle*, 37 (2018), nr. 3, p. 38. [https://epa.oszk.hu/02700/02705/00115/pdf/EPA02705\\_bortonugyi\\_szemle\\_2018\\_3\\_035-044.pdf](https://epa.oszk.hu/02700/02705/00115/pdf/EPA02705_bortonugyi_szemle_2018_3_035-044.pdf), accessed on 21.02.2022.

could eat their food from the “chayka”. Some of the original metal lock doors can still be found in Doberdó, with engravings from the 1950s. Some of the former political prisoners who visited the prison told how, when they were placed in the Doberdó, the prisoners were beaten, stripped naked and given a piece of thin, but unbreakable, cloth made of stiff fabric, like a cape. Instead of shoes, they were given special slipper-like footwear. This regularised clothing was necessary to prevent prisoners from committing suicide. According to the narrative, after three days in Doberdó, almost all the prisoners attempted suicide in some way, in the hope of avoiding further suffering. In the event of insubordination, they were subjected to ironing or beating with an iron, a crueller continuation of the medieval calado and short-iron punishment. The condemned man was thrown out into the cold corridor of the Doberdó, his legs and arms crossed, a chain was wrapped around his ankles and screwed on. One of the guards kneeled with his full weight on the prisoner's back so that the right hand could be pulled to the left ankle and the left to the right, and the chain was then secured in this extended position. If the prisoner fainted, he was doused with cold water. After two hours of being beaten with iron, the backs of the hands and feet would swell and turn black because of the obstruction of the blood flow. The violent stretching of the arm and leg muscles caused an inability to move, and the prisoner could only crawl back into the cell. The use of the short iron was abolished by the Imre Nagy government in 1953.

In the Doberdó it was cold even in summer, in winter the water poured into the “chayka” froze, the walls glistened with saltpetre. In the contemporary records considerable number of files were found with an ÁVH (State Protection Authority) entry in the occupation of prisoners. The reason for this was the so-called ‘reorganisation’ of the ÁVH, the replacement of the old set, i.e., the imprisonment of them. They were released in the 1954 revision, some of them were employed by the police, others in factories and workshops, and others in well-paid jobs or party posts. From the memoirs of the former prisoners, it is known that Doberdó was run by the ÁVH and then the Ministry of the Interior from the 1950s until 1963, and that during the time of ÁVH, no ordinary prison officer was allowed to enter here.<sup>26</sup>

In recent years, several noteworthy reports on the “Doberdó” have appeared in both print and online media in Hungary. The title of

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<sup>26</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Doberdó* (Official website of Vác Prison and Penitentiary, Doberdó), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-doberdo>, accessed on 26.01.2018

one article published in 2012 is already horrifying (“*The ÁVH has turned its enemies into plants*”): Former and future heads of state (Árpád Szakasits<sup>27</sup> and Árpád Göncz), communist party leaders (Mátyás Rákosi, Zoltán Vas<sup>28</sup> and János Kádár), world-famous child psychologist (Ferenc Mérei<sup>29</sup>), president of the Hungarian Football Federation and Minister of Justice (István Ries<sup>30</sup>), historians and social scientists who were also ministers (Bálint Hóman, István Bibó), writers and poets (Tibor Déry<sup>31</sup>, Bálint Tóth<sup>32</sup>), a railroad bomber terrorist (Szilveszter Matuska), the longest-serving prisoner in Hungary, who was a priest (Ödön Lénárd<sup>33</sup>) and a former ÁVH major, interrogator and later writer (András Berkesi<sup>34</sup>) were also imprisoned in Vác. The list of former inmates of the Vác prison and jail could be much longer. The “Doberdó” part of the building is no longer in use, in the 1950s it was occupied by the notorious communist secret police, the State Protection Authority (ÁVH). The ÁVH was ‘the state within the state’ from 1950 to 1953, when it took over the running of the Vác prison. Political prisoners were brought here to be humiliated and broken by the regime, and most of the time they were punished on trumped-up charges. Communists and left-wingers were not only imprisoned during the Horthy era, but a good number of them were also imprisoned during the Rákosi era, when Rákosi came to power: The head of state, Árpád Szakasits, for example, was arrested after the signing of the new, Communist constitution (1949). He got out of there, unlike István Ries, who was beaten to death, or Bálint Hóman, who lost half his weight and died in 1951. The former was Minister of Justice in the Rákosi era, the latter was Minister for Religion and Public Education in the Horthy era. A special case was that of András Berkesi, who was an interrogator in the “Katpol” (abbreviation for “Katonapolitikai Osztály” - Military Political Department), one of the harshest and most ruthless investigation

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<sup>27</sup> Szakasits, Árpád (1888-1965) journalist, social democrat politician, MP, Minister of State (1945-1948), Minister for Industry (1948), President of Hungary (1948-1949), Chairman of the Presidential Council of the People’s Republic of Hungary (1949-1950).

<sup>28</sup> Vas, Zoltán (1903-1983) journalist, writer, communist politician, MP, mayor of Budapest (1945), secretary of the Economic High Council (1945-1949) and later president of the Planning Office (1949-1953).

<sup>29</sup> Mérei, Ferenc (1909-1986) psychologist, educator, researcher.

<sup>30</sup> Ries, István (1885-1950) social democrat politician, President of the Hungarian Football Association (1947-1950), Minister of Justice (1945-1950).

<sup>31</sup> Déry, Tibor (1894-1977) writer, poet.

<sup>32</sup> Tóth, Bálint (1929-2017) writer, poet, literary translator.

<sup>33</sup> Lénárd, Ödön (1911-2003) Roman Catholic priest, Piarist father, teacher.

<sup>34</sup> Berkesi, András (1919-1997) officer of ‘Katpol’, major of ÁVH, interrogator, writer.

departments at the beginning of the communist dictatorship, but who suddenly found himself among the prisoners in Vác prison. His former interrogators allegedly beat him with a wooden spoon in the kitchen when they met him in prison.

Today, an inner courtyard of the prison opens onto the section used by the ÁVH, known by the prisoners as the Doberdó. In this section you can still see the standing cell. At first glance, the standing cell may not seem like a terrible instrument of torture, but the prisoner, confined to a narrow space and forced to remain motionless, could only stand and could not squat, sit down or otherwise rest his body. If he became unwell, he would faint, unable to assume the lying position necessary to normalise blood circulation, and would suffer permanent damage to his health, even if he survived, due to the disruption of blood supply to the brain. As a current lieutenant-colonel in the prison explained, this is what happened to András Zakar<sup>35</sup>, one of the priest defendants in the Mindszenty trial: he was effectively turned into a “vegetative being” by the ÁVH. There was no heating in the Doberdó, the air was not even properly heated, and the cells were inhumanly equipped: there was a narrow corridor of a few metres between the cells where the prisoners could stay during the day, and only at night could they have access to the bunk to rest. Of course, this was no rest either, with regular beatings interrupting the night, but it was not uncommon during the day either. And the sign that the prisoners should not only be guarded, but hated, warned the ÁVH prison guards that they were dealing with “enemies of the people”. The sufferings of political prisoners were not forgotten by the prison staff and the people of Vác: plaques commemorate the once unjustly persecuted on the prison walls.<sup>36</sup>

### **The “big house”/“MZ” building**

Another significant part of the prison terror of the 1950s was the so-called “big house”. This part is the formerly U-shaped block of buildings, then enclosed in a rectangular form - with the prison chapel -

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<sup>35</sup> Zakar, András (1912-1986) Roman Catholic priest, personal secretary of József Mindszenty.

<sup>36</sup> Szegő Iván Miklós, “Növényt csinált ellenségeiből az ÁVH” (The ÁVH has turned its enemies into plants), in *origo.hu*, 2012.09.15, <http://www.origo.hu/tudomany/tortenelem/20120913-az-avh-fogsagaban-kifinomult-kinzasok-az-otvenes-evekben.html>, accessed on 26.01.2018.

that was converted from the Theresianum building into a prison. Until 1893, when the “Magányzárka” (solitary confinement) building was built, prisoners were housed in the 56 dormitories of the “big house”, without any classification. Each cell housed 10 to 12 prisoners, and there were 16 occupation rooms for joint work. After the Second World War, prison officers had to prove their backgrounds in order to remain in the prison service. According to the memoirs of Béla Dénes<sup>37</sup>, a doctor, the situation of prisoners in Vác Prison was tolerable until 1949, and prisoner abuse was prohibited. During the time of the prison director Jenő Debreczeni<sup>38</sup>, beatings did not occur in the prison. Under the directorship of Major István Lehota<sup>39</sup>, a reign of terror began. The majority of Lehota’s fellow staff consisted of robbers, unemployed hobos turned uniformed prison guards. Prince Primate József Mindszenty was not imprisoned in Vác, but we know from his memoirs that one of his meetings with his mother was organised in here.

The four-storey “MZ”, or “Magányzárka” (solitary confinement) building was built in 1893, during the time of István Balkay<sup>40</sup>, the prison director. The building had 198 single cells, increasing the prison’s capacity at the time to 600 inmates. Inmates were placed in the private cells after they had been admitted, were subject to strict disciplinary rules, were not allowed to work and had only a modest diet. If they behaved well, the prisoners were moved to the next level, where they were only confined to the private cells at night, could participate in community work during the day and had better food than in the stricter level. Inmates who had reached the third grade were placed in the common cells of the institute, where the regime was not as strict as in solitary confinement. Currently, the solitary confinement building cells also accommodate 2-3 prisoners. Until the late 1980s, 4 people lived in a cell. János Kádár was imprisoned here, and above his former cell there was allegedly a plaque commemorating the fact. Árpád Szakasits, former Social Democrat leader, MDP president, deputy prime minister (1947),

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<sup>37</sup> Dénes, Béla (1904-1959) physician, writer, journalist, editor.

<sup>38</sup> Debreczeni, Jenő (?-?) lieutenant colonel, director of Vác Penitentiary and Prison (1947-1949, 1956).

<sup>39</sup> Lehota, István (1907-?) police officer, major (later: lieutenant colonel) of ÁVH, director of Vác Penitentiary and Prison (1950-1953).

<sup>40</sup> Balkay, István (?-?) director of Vác Penitentiary and Prison (1890-1906).

president of the republic (1948), also served time in the solitary confinement of Vác prison.<sup>41</sup>

### **The „House of Lords” and the translation office**

According to former political prisoners, there was a so-called “House of Lords” in Vác, which occupied about a third of the B side of the “Magányzárka” (solitary confinement) building built in 1893. Its courtyard was separated from the “MZ” courtyard by a large stone wall. A small metal gate in the wall provided access for the ÁVH staff working there. It is claimed that no prison guards were allowed to enter the “House of Lords”, only trusted members of the ÁVH. In fact, the “House of Lords” operated completely independently of the rest of the prison. No information was received from there, and it was almost impossible to send messages there. It is said to have been named in the 1950s after an English pilot and a photographer who had their spy plane forced down by Hungarian fighter planes. Both spies are said to have been English lords. They were held here until the British state paid a substantial ransom for them. After the release of the English lords, political prisoners who were declared class enemies were held here under quite strict rules in very harsh conditions. In the “House of Lords”, prisoners were not allowed to talk to each other, receive letters or parcels, receive visitors, or walk at all, or only very rarely. Laughter was punished with severity. The prison guards wore a centrally regulated “mamus” on their shoes so that they could approach the cell in silence. The door could also be opened silently, the prisoner only realising when the guard was inside the cell. Hence the name ‘rubber key’. For years, relatives were not allowed to know where the prisoner was, and often the prisoner himself did not know in which institution he was. This is where the world-famous scientist and psychologist Ferenc Méri, the historian György Litván<sup>42</sup> and the teacher Sándor Fekete<sup>43</sup> spent part of their sentences.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Elhelyezési körletek* (Official website of Vác Penitentiary and Prison, Accommodation circles), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-elhelyezesi-korletek>, accessed on 26.01.2018.

<sup>42</sup> Litván, György (1929-2006) teacher, historian, politician.

<sup>43</sup> Fekete, Sándor (1927-2001) writer, journalist, teacher, literary historian.

<sup>44</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Elhelyezési körletek* (Official website of Vác Penitentiary and Prison, Accommodation circles), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-elhelyezesi-korletek>, accessed on 26.01.2018.

After the completion of the “Magányzárka” building (1893), the construction of the U-shaped factory hall for the inmates’ work could begin on the Danube bank, forming a single block with the housing blocks. In 2005 Imre Mécs<sup>45</sup>, MP and former prisoner of Vác visited the institute and remembered that in one of the rooms of the factory building there was a “translation office” where political prisoners had political daily and weekly newspapers published in the West translated, at a time when reading any kind of press publication was forbidden in prisons. György Litván, Dr. Dezső Kertész<sup>46</sup>, Antal Kuklay<sup>47</sup> and Árpád Göncz were also employed here, so they were the ones who were aware of current world political events perhaps earlier than anyone else in the country. Unfortunately, the exact location of the translation office could not be found.<sup>48</sup>

### **Three significant martyrs from the Vác prison**

Of the thousands of political prisoners imprisoned here in the 1950s, I have selected three emblematic fates for a more detailed presentation. All three of them - with their lives, their uncompromising perseverance, courage, and martyrdom - symbolise the Hungarian people's desire for freedom and the tragedy of resistance to the repressive machinery of the system.

Attila Gérecz was born on 20 November 1929 in Dunakeszi. In 1939, the family moved to Budapest to the tenement house, built for MÁV workers, because of the father's promotion. However, his father, Ödön Gérecz could not work for much longer. He died on 15 March 1943. The mother raised her three sons alone. Attila Gérecz, after completing the first four classes of the Kölcsey Ferenc Grammar School next to their house, followed in his father’s footsteps, and wanted to study at the famous Calvinist Grammar School in Sárospatak, but - it is not known what his decision was - in the autumn of 1944 he enlisted in the Hungarian Royal Gábor Áron Honvéd Artillery School of Nagyvárad (Oradea), which had been evacuated to Sümeg. During the Second

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<sup>45</sup> Mécs, Imre (1933- ) electrical engineer, politician, MP.

<sup>46</sup> Kertész, Dezső (1929-?) doctor, medical officer, chairman of the revolutionary military committee of the Hódmezővásárhely military corps during the 1956 revolution.

<sup>47</sup> Kuklay, Antal (1932-) Roman Catholic priest, literary historian.

<sup>48</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Kiszolgáló építmények, épületek* (Official website of Vác Penitentiary and Prison, Serving buildings), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-kiszolgáló-építmények-épületek>, accessed on 26.01.2018

World War, he was sent as a student to Friedrichshafen, Germany, and after the French occupation of the city to Taldorf. He returned home from French captivity on 23 October 1946. He continued his civilian studies with a series of private examinations to make up for the years he had spent as a prisoner of war. Within a year, he had passed three different examinations from three years of secondary school and graduated from the Kölcsey Ferenc Grammar School in Budapest in 1948.

After not being able to go to university due to his family background and being a war soldier, he qualified as an iron worker and worked in the factory named after Mátyás Rákosi in Csepel. Using what he had learned at military school, he took up pentathlon. In 1949, he became a member of the Hungarian national pentathlon team, defeating the future Olympic and world champion Gábor Benedek in pistol shooting. He excelled in horse riding, fencing, running, swimming and competitive skiing. His sporting career was abruptly cut short by his arrest on 8 December 1950, when the young man, then working as a design technician, was transferred from his former workplace to the Fő Street prison. He was tried, along with most of his friends mentioned above, on charges of infidelity. Five death sentences were passed in their case, three of which were carried out. Of the twenty-eight defendants, Attila received the third most severe sentence, ten years in prison at first instance and twelve years at second instance on 29 August 1951. As a prisoner, he was first taken to the Budapest Collective Prison and in April 1952 to the Vác prison, where he was befriended by the 'poets of the Füveskert', including Géza Béri<sup>49</sup>, Kamil Kárpáti<sup>50</sup>, György Szathmáry<sup>51</sup>, Tibor Kecskési Tollas<sup>52</sup> and Bálint Tóth, and encouraged to write poetry and translate works. Already his first poem, "Így bocskorosan" ("Like this, in peasant sandals"), was recognized by his fellow poets as a mature, full-fledged work.

On 18 July 1954, at the height of the Danube flood, he managed to escape from Vác prison in a brilliant manner. His physical abilities as an athlete, his stamina and his courage also played a part in his swimming across the Danube, which was overflowing its banks and lapping the prison walls, and through a series of dangerous situations he made his way to Budapest. He was captured after three days in hiding. For his

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<sup>49</sup> Béri, Géza (1933-1979) poet, writer, playwright, literary translator.

<sup>50</sup> Kárpáti, Kamil (1929-) writer, poet, essayist.

<sup>51</sup> Szathmáry, György (1928-1990), poet, literary translator.

<sup>52</sup> Kecskési Tollas, Tibor (1920-1997) military officer, poet, editor.

escape he was sentenced to two more years in prison in March 1955. Until his sentencing he was imprisoned first in the Collector's Prison and then again in Vác, where his hunger strike weakened his body so much that he became a resident of the prison hospital for a while. In the summer of 1955, he was transferred to Márianosztra, the most restrictive prison of the time. It was there that he produced one of the most significant works of his poetry, his poems of more than 600 lines of prose interspersed with prose poems, which chronicle his escape, as well as his poem "Sorsod művészete" ("The Art of Your Fate"), considered by literary historians to be the greatest of his works. The last period of his imprisonment was again spent in the Collector's Prison, from which he was released by the revolutionaries on 1 November 1956, along with nearly eight hundred political prisoners. He lived three or four days of happiness and freedom, the details of which can be found in his mother's letters and notes. He spent much time with his friends at the headquarters of the National Association of Political Prisoners ("POFOSZ") in Benczúr Street, where they gave certificates to newly released comrades, and on 3 November he read out a proclamation on behalf of the young generation of artists released from prison, which radiates the ideals of love, forgiveness, and national unity. At dawn on 5 November, he joined the freedom fighters. He fought with his old friends Emil Csaszókóczy<sup>53</sup> and András Zsótér<sup>54</sup> around Blaha Lujza Square, and then retreated to the ruined building of the Hotel Continental on Dohány Street. It was from here that he made his final journey on 7 November, just before dusk, when he was fatally shot by a Soviet tank at the mouth of Klauzál Street.<sup>55</sup>

Ödön Lénárd was born in Budapest on 11 September 1911. He graduated from the grammar school of the Piarists in Kecskemét. He entered the Piarist Order in 1926, took simple monastic vows in 1929 and solemn monastic vows in 1933, while studying theology, Latin, and history at the University of Budapest between 1931 and 1936. Together with Domokos Kosáry<sup>56</sup>, he was a direct student of Gyula Szekfű<sup>57</sup>. The

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<sup>53</sup> Csaszókóczy, Emil (?-?) military officer student, freedom fighter, doctor.

<sup>54</sup> Zsótér, András (1930-?) sportsman, freedom fighter.

<sup>55</sup> Hajnal Géza, Horváth Bence (eds.), "*Gérecz Attila életrajza*" (Biography of Attila Gérecz), in *A Gérecz-hagyaték. Gérecz Attila – Élet és életmű*, 2016, <http://www.gereczhagyatek.hu/index.php/eletrajz>, accessed on 21.02.2022.

<sup>56</sup> Kosáry, Domokos (1913-2007) historian, university professor, president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1990-1996).

<sup>57</sup> Szekfű, Gyula (1883-1955) historian, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, ambassador.

renowned professor found Ödön Lénárd worthy of an academic career and tried to ask him to join his order, but the Piarists argued that they needed teachers, not scholars. He was ordained a priest in 1936 by Bishop József Grósz<sup>58</sup>. After university, he worked as a practising teacher in Budapest and Kecskemét in 1937, then taught at the Piarist high school in Szeged between 1938 and 1945, and from 1939 he held the position of deputy principal. From 1946 he was cultural secretary of the *Actio Catholica* in Budapest, and from 1947 he taught sociology at the Kalazantinum. At the AC, his duties included managing the affairs of the Catholic movement against the nationalisation of schools, liaising with the Religious Association of Catholic Parents and with Archbishop József Mindszenty of Esztergom.

On 17 June 1948 he was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison on charges of incitement. He was imprisoned in the Collector's Prison and in Vác Penitentiary and Prison and was released on amnesty on 1 August 1953. Since he did not take the oath of allegiance, he was not allowed to hold a church post. He worked as a pedicab delivery boy at the Óbuda Shoe Repair Cooperative, and after its dissolution in 1961 he became a water meter reader. In 1961, as part of the ecclesiastical policy of Communism under the Kádár regime, hundreds of Catholic priests and faithful were arrested by the state security. Ödön Lénárd was again imprisoned, detained in Márianosztra and Sátoraljaujhely, and released again in 1963 with amnesty. He worked as an independent administrator in the kitchen of the University of Economics. In April 1966 he was arrested again and in November he was sentenced to eight years in the Collector's Prison. After 1975, the Helsinki Convention led to a significant easing of East-West relations. On 9 June 1977, the Pope received János Kádár at the Vatican. Kádár reported on his trip to Rome at the meeting of the MSZMP PB (the political committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) on 28 June 1977, mentioning that Archbishop Agostino Casaroli<sup>59</sup> had asked for his intercession on behalf of the Catholic priest Ödön Lénárd, who was still serving his prison sentence. Following the PB's decision, the State Office for Church Affairs initiated the pardon procedure with the Ministry of Justice and then tried to persuade the Piarist Order to allow Father Ödön to leave the country. Ödön Lénárd was released that month, having served a total

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<sup>58</sup> Grósz, József (1887-1961), Roman Catholic priest, Bishop of Szombathely, Archbishop of Kalocsa (1943-1961).

<sup>59</sup> Agostino Casaroli (1914-1998) Roman Catholic priest, diplomat, Cardinal Secretary of State for Holy See.

of 6,749 days (18 and a half years) in prison, more than any other political prisoner. In 1991, all the court judgments against him were annulled by the Supreme Court. Father Ödön died on 23 May 2003.<sup>60</sup>

Mátyás Balogh was born in 1887 in Békés, in a family of farmers with roots in Békés, and grew up in the town. He lost his father early. He obtained his Calvinist pastor's diploma in Debrecen, then served as an assistant pastor in Gyula. He married in 1915, and their marriage resulted in two daughters. When one of the pastoral posts in Békés became vacant in 1931, he applied for it together with thirteen other pastors. To his great joy, Mátyás Balogh was able to return home to his homeland and hometown, as the great congregation of the lowlands elected him by a "large majority" from among the candidates. He was actively involved in public life and faithfully carried out his pastoral ministry. He did not flee from the front during the Second World War and remained in his place with his fellow pastors. After the full establishment of the party-state dictatorship, he, and the members of his presbytery, who were branded as "kulaks", were kept under constant surveillance, as one of the prominent members of the presbytery was István B. Szabó<sup>61</sup>, who had shortly before been involved in political life as the president of the Independent Smallholders' Party of Békés County and as a minister of state in the government of Ferenc Nagy<sup>62</sup>. Mátyás Balogh was remanded in custody on 13 March 1953. He was first taken to Gyula and then to Vác. The Békés District Court sentenced Mátyás Balogh to six years' imprisonment, a fine of three thousand forints and confiscation of four thousand forints on charges of incitement against the democratic order of the people and crimes against social property. In the meantime, Bishop János Péter<sup>63</sup>, who had cooperated with the party state, ordered the presidency of the Békés diocese to conduct disciplinary proceedings five days after the arrest, on behalf of the "Tiszántúli" Calvinist Diocese.

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<sup>60</sup> Szabó Csaba, "Tíz éve távozott Lénárd Ödön, a kommunista hatalom üldözöttje" (Ten years since the death of Ödön Lénárd, persecuted by the communist power), 23 May 2013, in <https://piarista.hu/hirek/t%C3%ADz-%C3%A9ve-t%C3%A1vozott-l%C3%A9n%C3%A1rd-%C3%B6d%C3%B6n-kommunista-hatalom-%C3%BCld%C3%B6z%C3%B6ttje>, accessed on 20.02.2022.

<sup>61</sup> B. Szabó, István (1893-1976) smallholder politician, MP, Minister of State (1946, 1956).

<sup>62</sup> Nagy, Ferenc (1903-1979) smallholder politician, MP, Prime Minister of Hungary (1946-1947).

<sup>63</sup> Péter, János (1910-1999) Calvinist pastor, bishop of 'Tiszántúli' Calvinist Diocese, Minister for Foreign Affairs (1961-1973).

He was then suspended from his pastoral position by the diocesan court of Békés on 9 May 1953. His wife appealed against this, but her application was rejected. The secular court proceedings were conducted at second instance by the Gyula County Court. The date of the trial was set for 20 July 1953. Mátyás Balogh could not attend the second instance trial because he had died of illness in Vác on one of the previous days. Researchers into the life of Mátyás Balogh encountered obstacles when searching for the material of the second trial, and there were also questions about the exact date of death. Mátyás Balogh is presumed to have been buried in an unmarked grave in the Vác prison cemetery.<sup>64</sup>

A young poet, a Piarist father, and a Calvinist pastor: three tragic fate from Hungary under the dark reign of communism, all three bound together by the fact that they were tortured in the Vác Penitentiary and Prison.

### **The 1956 Revolution in Vác Penitentiary and Prison**

On 23 October 1956, a revolution broke out in Hungary, first in Budapest and later in the countryside, followed by a heroic fight for freedom against the invading Red Army until mid-November 1956. On 27 October 1956, political prisoners broke out of the “big house” of the Vác Prison and Penitentiary through the iron gate next to the bakery (now the kitchen) into the garage yard. The prison commander, Márton Gáspár<sup>65</sup>, to avoid bloodshed, did not use violence against the escapees, and the prisoners left the prison in a ring of prison guards. At this time, the ÁVH units assigned to guard the outside were no longer in the institute. After the first groups had been released, the release was more organised, civilian clothes were issued from the deposit, and the transport of patients was organised. Each of the witnesses remembers the shoot-out during the liberation differently. According to the most credible accounts, the first shots were fired from the hospital building, and then soldiers in a truck, who had been sent to the institute to

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<sup>64</sup> Erdős Kristóf, “Ügyében másodfokon ítélet született, pedig már azelőtt meghalt a Váci Börtönben – Balogh Mátyás református lelképásztor portréjának vázlat” (His case was sentenced to second instance, even though he had already died in Váci Prison - Portrait of Mátyás Balogh, Calvinist Pastor), in *ArchívNet. XX. századi történelmi források*. 18 (2018), nr. 5, <https://www.archivnet.hu/ugyeben-masodfokon-itelet-szulett-pedig-mar-azelott-meghalt-a-vaci-bortonben-balogh-matyas>, accessed on 21.02.2022.

<sup>65</sup> Gáspár, Márton (?-?) captain of ÁVH, director of Vác Penitentiary and Prison (1955-1960).

maintain order, returned fire on the hospital building. During a search of the buildings, one person was arrested, the hospital's chief physician.<sup>66</sup>

Tibor Petrusz<sup>67</sup>, retired colonel, former political prisoner of Vác recalled October 1956 and the twelve days of freedom: “One cannot understand 1956 if one does not know its background. The 1956 Revolution was the struggle for freedom of a people who had been tormented for eleven years, because it all began in 1945, when the Allies sold Hungary out in the Yalta Pact and our country was subjected to a proletarian regime. The Hungarian nation, which had gone through two regime changes and many injustices in a decade, finally ‘had enough’ on 23 October 1956. On the fourth day of the revolution, the tension in the air and the ‘breath of freedom’ could be felt even within the prison walls. ‘You could feel the pulse of the city’, the colonel recalled. On that day, in the evening, someone started singing the ‘Himnusz’ (‘National Anthem’) from the depths of one of the cells, and one by one the cells ‘burst into song’. We all sang it in tears, saying to ourselves that if this could happen today, tomorrow anything was possible! And the next day, on 27 October, thanks to the unity of the people of this great city and the hundreds of political prisoners, the prison gates opened. We hugged each other in tears and the ‘Himnusz’ (‘National Anthem’) and the ‘Szózat’ (‘Appeal’) were once again sung. And in vain was the repression, the Bolshevik oppression, because the dictatorial power was shaken in October 1956 and its decline began for good.”<sup>68</sup>

### **About Vác prison cemetery**

The cemetery was mainly used for the burial of political prisoners, 118 people who died in Vác Prison between 1945 and 1959. Its historical role is like that of plots 298 and 301 of the New Public Cemetery in Budapest. Its cemetery-archaeological excavation was carried out in 2000, and the expert work led to the identification of the remains of the politician and historian Bálint Hóman, among others. On 1 November 2001, the Vác prison cemetery was inaugurated as a

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<sup>66</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Elhelyezési körletek* (Official website of Vác Penitentiary and Prison, Accommodation circles), <http://bv.gov.hu/vac-elhelyezesi-korletek>, accessed on 26.01.2018.

<sup>67</sup> Petrusz, Tibor (1924-) military officer, colonel.

<sup>68</sup> Sz. N., “*Amikor megnyíltak a börtönkapuk*” (When the prison gates opened), in VácOnline, 27.10.2005, <http://www.vaconline.hu/esemenyek/amikor-megnyiltak-a-bortonkapuk...html>, accessed on 28.01.2018.

memorial park, on which a monument was erected. It is also the burial place of former Prime Minister István Friedrich<sup>69</sup> (1882-1951), whose grave is protected as part of the National Graveyard.<sup>70</sup>

A historian and university professor László Karsai<sup>71</sup> expressed a characteristic point of view about some of the prisoners buried in the Vác prison cemetery in his 2010 article in “Népszabadság” daily: “The newspapers reported that the ‘piety-archaeological’ excavation of the Vác cemetery had been completed, and the dead had been identified by forensic medical experts. Newspapers reported about ‘political victims’ and ‘political prisoners’ who had been buried in graves unmarked for half a century. The list of names published in the newspapers contained 118 names. Of these, Bálint Hóman, university professor and historian, is perhaps the best known. A staunchly pro-Nazi cultural politician, he served as Minister of Religion and Public Education in the Teleki<sup>72</sup>, Bárdossy<sup>73</sup> and briefly Kállay<sup>74</sup> governments from 1939 to 1942. Hóman also used his undisputed authority as a historian to legitimise anti-Semitic laws, against which he never spoke out in favour of them on several occasions. Bálint Hóman died in Vác prison on 2 June 1951. Jenő Rátz<sup>75</sup> was deputy prime minister in the Sztójay<sup>76</sup> government, which was an enthusiastic collaborator with the Nazis, and Ferenc Szálasi<sup>77</sup>, the Arrow Cross ‘leader of the nation’, appointed him president of the Upper

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<sup>69</sup> Friedrich, István (1883-1951) politician, football player, factory owner, MP, Prime Minister of Hungary (1919).

<sup>70</sup> Nemzeti Örökség Intézete, “*Váci rabtemető*” (Vác prison cemetery) in <https://intezet.nori.gov.hu/historical-sites/Vac/vac-hetkapolna-honvedemlekmu-es-rabtemeto/>, accessed on 19.02.2022.

<sup>71</sup> Karsai, László (1950-) historian, university professor.

<sup>72</sup> Teleki, Pál (1879-1941) count, geographer, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs (1920), Minister of Religion and Public Education (1938-1939), Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1920-1921, 1939-1941).

<sup>73</sup> Bárdossy, László (1890-1946) diplomat, politician, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs (1941), Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1941-1942).

<sup>74</sup> Kállay, Miklós (1887-1967) politician, MP, Minister of Agriculture (1932-1935), Minister for Foreign Affairs (1942-1943), Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1942-1944).

<sup>75</sup> Rátz, Jenő (1882-1952) military officer, general, MP, Minister for Defence (1938), Deputy Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1944).

<sup>76</sup> Sztójay, Döme (1883-1946), diplomat, military officer, politician, Minister for Foreign Affairs (1944), Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1944).

<sup>77</sup> Szálasi, Ferenc (1897-1946) military officer, politician, MP, leader of the Arrow Cross Party–Hungarist Movement, ‘Leader of the Nation’ (1944-1945) (both head of state and prime minister of the Kingdom of Hungary).

House of the Parliament. As the reasoning of his People's Court verdict, in accordance with historical facts, stated, Rátz was the third Nazi candidate for prime minister on 19 March 1944, along with Béla Imrédy<sup>78</sup> and Jenő Ruzskay<sup>79</sup>, only Miklós Horthy preferred to appoint Döme Sztójay instead. The politician died in Vác prison on 21 January 1952. From 1939 Géza Szögi<sup>80</sup> was the Arrow Cross deputy of Szeged and made a series of anti-Semitic speeches in the House of Representatives. In the Szálasi government, he was the legal adviser to Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Szöllősi, as State Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, and he also kept the minutes of government meetings. He was sentenced to life imprisonment by the People's Court, but the National Council of People's Courts (NOT), upholding his defence that he had no real decision-making role in the Arrow Cross regime, reduced his sentence to ten years' imprisonment. He died in 1952 in Vác prison. (...) Of the 25 people buried in the Vác prison cemetery (apart from Hóman, Rátz and Szögi), it is known when they were tried by the People's Court, on what charges and what sentence they were given. (...) The memorial plaque lists ten people who in no way deserve to have their names immortalised alongside the real political prisoners. The simplest case seems to be that of Géza Perényi<sup>81</sup>. The retired Lieutenant Colonel of the Gendarmerie was sentenced to 12 years in prison because he accepted the post of 'főispán' ('lord-lieutenant') of Nógrád county, 'without any compulsion threatening his life', and took a leading position in the Arrow Cross regime, under the persuasion of László Budinszky<sup>82</sup>, the Arrow Cross Minister of Justice. The People's Court sentenced him to 10 years in prison, the NOT to 12 years. As it turned out before the People's Court, he had committed no crime during his three weeks as chieftain, but according to the law and case-law of the People's Court, his sentence seems justified, if too severe. He died in Vác prison on 11

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<sup>78</sup> Imrédy, Béla (1891-1946) economist, politician, MP, Minister of Finance (1932-1935), President of the Hungarian National Bank (1935-1938), Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary (1938-1939).

<sup>79</sup> Ruzskay, Jenő (1887-1946) military officer, diplomat, politician.

<sup>80</sup> Szögi, Géza (1902-1952) lawyer, politician, MP, State Secretary to the Prime Minister's Office (1944-1945).

<sup>81</sup> Perényi, Géza (1892-1955) lieutenant colonel, politician, lord lieutenant of Nógrád county (1944-1945).

<sup>82</sup> Budinszky, László (1895-1946) military officer, politician, MP, Minister of Justice (1944-1945).

December 1955.”<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, I believe that many former political prisoners who were innocently convicted and often tortured to death are also buried in the Vác cemetery.

### **A look at the post-1956 revolution: the hunger strike in 1960**

After the 1956 revolution, the Vác Penitentiary and Prison was one of the largest detention centres for political prisoners. The Münnich<sup>84</sup> government declared a partial amnesty on 4 April 1960. In addition to the legally defined group of prisoners, some notable personalities were granted individual pardons, such as Tibor Déry, Ferenc Donáth<sup>85</sup> and Gyula Háý<sup>86</sup>. The amnesty caused great disappointment among the prisoners. A hunger strike broke out in the Vác prison because of its narrow scope and dissatisfaction with the 'exceptions'. The writer Árpád Göncz, former president of the Republic of Hungary (1990-2000), who died in 2015 and this year was the 100th anniversary of his birth, was also imprisoned in Vác prison at the time. His recollections, in which he briefly summarised the main course of events, were recorded by András B. Hegedűs<sup>87</sup>: *„For three quarters of a year before the amnesty of 4 April 1960, people had been calling the prison headquarters, first the room attendants, and the news had been spreading that we would be going home in the autumn. We kept hearing the same from the guards. One by one, they were questioning people about where they were going, what about their families, where they were going to work, etc. And then the amnesty came, and it turned out that very few people were going home... As far as I know, it was the health staff who were going around with the guard who spread the word about the hunger strike. Maybe it started at the button factory. As we were about to go to work, I saw from the window that two machine guns were set up on either side of the road leading to the factory, and the group refusing to work turned back in front of the machine guns against orders. It was eerie. Afterwards, they closed the lockups everywhere - as was the custom at night. Under normal circumstances, machine guns were only up in the watchtowers. I don't understand how they dared to put it up. Even the guards inside the bars were not*

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<sup>83</sup> Karsai László, “*A váci rabtemető halottai*” (The dead of the Vác prison cemetery), in *Népszabadság*, 27.02.2010, [http://nol.hu/belfold/20100227-a\\_vaci\\_rabtemeto\\_halottai-565191](http://nol.hu/belfold/20100227-a_vaci_rabtemeto_halottai-565191), accessed on 28.01.2018.

<sup>84</sup> Münnich, Ferenc (1886-1967) communist politician, MP, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary (1958-1961).

<sup>85</sup> Donáth, Ferenc (1913-1986) communist politician, publicist, agricultural historian, MP.

<sup>86</sup> Háý, Gyula (1900-1975) writer, playwright, literary translator.

<sup>87</sup> Hegedűs B., András (1930-2001) politician, economist, historian.

*allowed to carry weapons, nor were they allowed to enter the cells unless the other guard was standing in the doorway. The machine-gun had already indicated that the situation was extraordinary... Word of mouth had started in the cell. I was in a cell with Bibó, among others. The others advised that we two should stay out of it, otherwise they'd blame everything on us. We refused, of course, we had no choice... The strike lasted maybe two or three days. Down in the Doberdó, in the watery prison cells in the basement, there were some people who held out for six days, and, as I heard, the guards threw cigarettes at them in the meantime. The greatest alarm was caused when the strike spread to the hospital, to the lung ward. There could easily have been a fatality. Then they called Elek Nagy<sup>88</sup>, the former president of the Csepel Workers' Council, to headquarters and asked him what the conditions of the prisoners were. Later, when the hunger strike ended, the winds blew that there would be no reprisals. Then a few weeks passed, and the prison was dispersed. We were the first to be taken away. It is interesting that when they started to call people out, many of them thought they were going to be released... They took me to Márianosztra first, about thirty of me. Apparently, we were the prisoners considered the most dangerous. (...) Less than a month later I found myself in the Collector's Prison".<sup>89</sup>*

I believe that a more detailed description of the 1960 and 1963 Vác hunger strikes would go beyond the scope of this article, so I have only mentioned them in passing. I also wanted to point out that the repression continued in prisons after 1956, and few political prisoners remained in Hungarian prisons until the end of the 1980s, until the fall of communism.

## Conclusion

At present, the Vác Penitentiary and Prison is a national executive institution. Of course, political prisoners are no longer held here. The prison covers an area of almost 29 000 m<sup>2</sup> and is almost 60% built-up. Its basic task is to execute custodial sentences for adult men who have been finally sentenced to prison and penitentiary, and to serve remand in custody ordered by the four municipal (district) courts in its area of jurisdiction. The institute is headed by the head of the institute, with heads of department in each specialised area. The staff of the

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<sup>88</sup> Nagy, Elek (1926-1994) military officer, translator, worker, president of the Csepel workers' council in 1956.

<sup>89</sup> "Göncz Árpád visszaemlékezése: A váci éhségsztrájk" (Árpád Göncz's memoir: The Hunger Strike in Vác) Lejegyezte Hegedűs B. András, in Beszélő (2) 1997 nr. 2. p. 84. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/a-vaci-ehsegsztrajk>, accessed on 21.02.2018.

Institute are employed in the professional service, as law enforcement officers or as employees.

The Hungarian Prison Service Headquarters is the superior body of the Institute, while the Pest County Prosecutor General's Office is the body responsible for the supervision of the law.<sup>90</sup> Walking around the gloomy walls of this well-guarded facility, you can almost feel the dark past. Since the change of regime, the walls of the prison are lined with plaques. They bear the names of the political prisoners who were innocently imprisoned, tortured and often tormented to death. I am also commemorating them in this article, because the crimes of communism must not be forgotten.

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<sup>90</sup> Váci Fegyház és Börtön honlapja, *Közérdekű adatok*, (Official website of Vác Penitentiary and Prison, Data of public interest), <https://bv.gov.hu/intezetek/vac/kozadat> accessed on 23.02.2022.