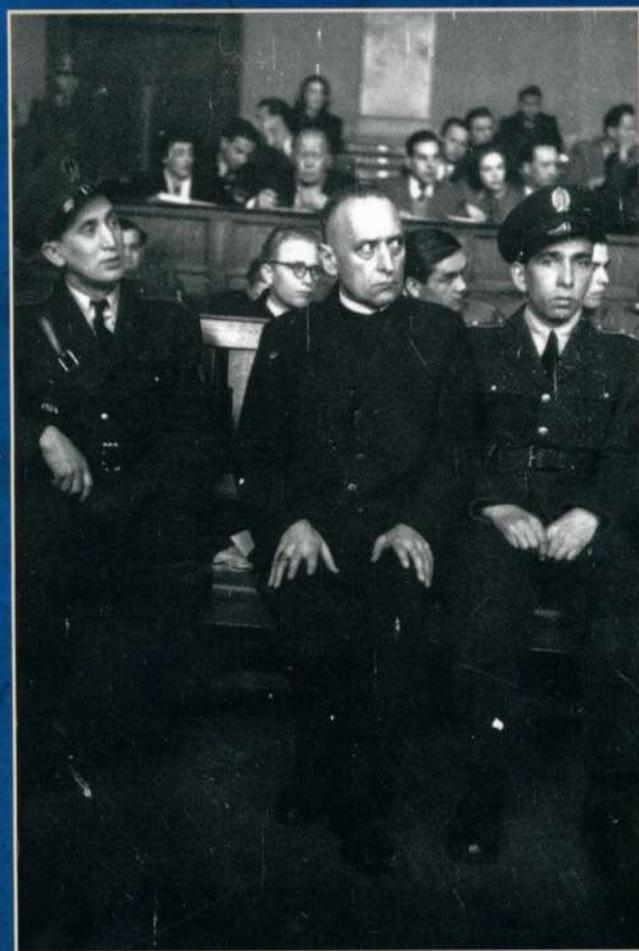


PONTIFICIO COMITATO DI SCIENZE STORICHE

**THE TRIAL OF
CARDINAL JÓZSEF MINDSZENTY
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF SEVENTY YEARS**



The Fate of Church Leaders
in Central and Eastern Europe

Edited by
ANDRÁS FEJÉRDY – BERNADETT WIRTHNÉ DIERA



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**“TO DIE FOR CHRIST MEANS
TO LIVE FOREVER”**
**BLESSED TÓDOR ROMZSA AND THE MARTYRS
AND CONFESSORS OF THE FAITH OF THE
GREEK CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF MUKACHEVO
(MUNKÁCS)**

KONSTANTIN SZABÓ AND ISTVÁN MAROSI

1. Introduction

The backbone of our study is a presentation given by Konstantin Szabó, a Greek Catholic priest on February 14, 2019 at the conference titled “A Mindszenty-per hetven év távlatából – Főpapi sorsok Kelet-Közép-Európában” [The Mindszenty Trial in the Perspective of Seventy Years. Prelate Fates in East-Central Europe]. The presentation was partly based upon Father Szabó’s own experiences of family and church life as a Greek Catholic priest in the Eparchy of Mukachevo (Munkács), and it sought to contribute to research on religious repression in Transcarpathia during the communist era, which ended thirty years ago. Focusing on the relationship between the Soviet state and local society, this research seeks to reveal the events that took place under the communist regime, with the specific aim of compiling a chronology of the various periods of persecution, thereby assisting further research.¹

In the present study, as we present the various aspects of local society and the conditions prevailing at the time, we rely primarily on the personal experiences, reflections, and interpretation of Konstantin Szabó, one of the

¹ The topic of this research, which is currently being undertaken with the support of the Hungarian Consulate in Berehove (Beregszász) is the persecution under communism of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo (Munkács), which comprises the Hungarian Greek Catholic communities of Transcarpathia. The aim of this research is to compile a chronology for the period between 1944 and 1989, summarizing the general and specific events of anti-religious persecution relating to Greek Catholics, providing specific dates for events as well as brief thematical and biographical descriptions. At the time of the writing of this paper, the research was expected to be concluded on December 31, 2019.

two co-authors. The presentation of this personal testimony as oral history adds to the credibility and authenticity of our research, which seeks to offer a scholarly assessment of the discussed events and life histories.

We are also aware that it is important to underline the ongoing nature of the research when we present our data and the correlations drawn from said data. There is clearly a need for the research and the foreseen results of such research because until now, research on the church dioceses has concentrated on revealing the life stories of various individuals.² Yet there is now a growing consensus among experts that the history of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo (Munkács) during the period of repression in the twentieth century is best interpreted in the context of the enforced social changes that occurred in the region, which was occupied by the Soviet forces after the Second World War. The history of the Eparchy should, therefore, be conceived and interpreted as part of historical research on Transcarpathian Ukraine (also known as Sub-Carpathian Ukraine). Under the given historical circumstances, the tendency of historians to view and present the leading personalities as epoch-making individuals obscures awareness of the sacrifices made by the ordinary clergy in the Eparchy. We trust that in this field, our research will contribute to a greater understanding of the roles played by the church and the state in that period. It may also facilitate individual and collective reconciliation, the healing of wounds caused by violence, and the presentation of the historical heritage of the region.

² See L. PUSKÁS, *Romzsa Tódor élete és halála* [The life and death of Tódor Romzsa], Budapest 1998; L. PUSKÁS, *Ilyeneké Isten országa. Orosz Péter titokban felszentelt püspök élete és vértanúsága* [The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. The life and martyrdom of Péter Orosz, the secretly consecrated bishop], Budapest 2010. The gulag diary titled *Öt év a szögesdrót mögött* [Five years behind barbed wire] by István Bendász has appeared in five editions to date: 1) I. BENDÁSZ, *Öt év a szögesdrót mögött* [Five Years Behind Barbed Wire], Budapest 1991; 2) Abaliget 2000; 3) S. BENDÁSZ, *Five Years Behind Barbed Wire*. Fairfax (VA) 2004; 4) С. Бендас, *П'ять років за колючим ґротом. Щоденник священика, написаний в Гулазі* [Five years behind barbed wire. A priest's diary written in the Gulag], Ужгород 2008; 5) I. BENDÁSZ, *Egy kárpátaljai görög katolikus pap naplója a Gulágban* [Diary of a Transcarpathian Greek Catholic priest in the Gulag], Uzhhorod 2012. See also E. ORTUTAY, "... *Holnap is felkel a Nap*" [The Sun will rise tomorrow, too], Uzhhorod – Budapest 1993; and for information on a total of 127 priests, see I. BENDÁSZ – D. BENDÁSZ, *Helytállás és tanúságtétel. A Munkácsi Görög Katolikus Egyházmegye hitvalló és meghurcolt papjai* [Steadfastness and testimony. The steadfast and persecuted priests of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo], Budapest 2014.

Concerning the period discussed in this paper and its general context, Father Konstantin Szabó’s testimony is as follows:

I was born five years after the death of Stalin. As a child, I heard on more than one occasion how my father had been ordained as priest by Bishop Tódor Romzsa, who had been presiding at a public ordination for the last time. This took place on September 14, 1947. A mere forty-three days later, Bishop Romzsa was attacked. Four days later – when it seemed the bishop might survive his injuries – a second attempt was made on his life: the bishop was poisoned, an atrocity that proved fatal. At the age of thirty-six, Bishop Romzsa completed his earthly mission in the eleventh year of his priesthood and the third year of his episcopate.

My parents and relatives spoke in the same way of Uncle Peti; this was how we referred to the martyr Péter Orosz. Upon hearing of Uncle Peti’s martyrdom, my father, who was being held at a prison camp at the time, wrote the following to my mother: “In our family, after three priests who remained steadfast, there is now a martyr.”

None of this could be spoken about at the time. It was not a taboo subject; rather, our fathers had grown accustomed to the fact – and had taught us the same – that there were subjects, persons, and events about which one could not speak. This is how I and my elder sister and brother grew up, as did 393 other clergy children whose fathers had been arrested and convicted simply because they had remained steadfast to the Catholic faith. Our father did not convert to another denomination or change his political views. He remained true to his Oath of Fidelity and faithful to the teachings [of Christ]; he did not yield to the new ideology.

2. The Fate of the Eparchy of Mukachevo in the Postwar Soviet Union

2.1. The Eparchy of Mukachevo at the start of the period of religious persecution

The persecution of the churches began immediately after the arrival of the Soviet troops in the Transcarpathian region, where a deterioration in the relationship between church and state had been anticipated by representatives of the Catholic Church; they thus sought to prepare in advance for the problems that would follow.

After the death of Bishop Sándor Sztojka in 1943, Miklós Dudás, bishop of the Eparchy of Hajdúdorog served temporarily as the apostolic administrator of the Eparchy of Mukachevo.³ Bishop Dudás began as early as the summer of 1944 to prepare the clergy for the possibility of religious persecution, which the Vatican was also anticipating based on its information about the division of the region into new spheres of influence. It was to be expected that the Kremlin would view the Catholic Church with its loyalty to Rome as the main obstacle to establishing a new social and ideological order.⁴ In August 1944, Bishop Dudás convened meetings in Uzhhorod (Ungvár), Mukachevo, and Khust (Huszt)⁵ in order to prepare priests for the difficulties ahead, and to inform them about how they should conduct themselves with respect to the Sacraments under persecution.⁶ In preparation for the possibility of a clandestine church, the Eparchy also published and made available to the clergy the text of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, supplemented by

³ Miklós Dudás, OSBM. Born to peasant farmer parents in Máriapócs on October 27, 1902, he attended primary and secondary school in Nyírbátor and Nagykálló. He joined the Order of Saint Basil the Great in 1920 and served as a novice at the Saint Nicholas Monastery on Cherceha Hora in Mukachevo. He studied philosophy at the Basilian College in Krystynopol/Chervonohrad and later theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he also studied at the Pontificium Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum. He took his solemn profession in Máriapócs on October 18, 1925. István Miklósy, the Eparch of Hajdúdorog ordained him a priest on September 8, 1927. He taught philosophy at the Basilian Monastery in Malyi Bereznii (Kisberezna) and then served as the novice master of the Saint Nicholas Monastery in Mukachevo. In 1932, he became head of the Basilian branch of the Basilian Order. He was appointed Bishop (Eparch) of Hajdúdorog on March 25, 1939. In 1944, he was the Apostolic Administrator of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, and between 1946 and 1972, he served as the Apostolic Administrator of the Apostolic Exarchate of Miskolc. Bishop Miklós Dudás was the one who consecrated as bishop the Blessed Tódor Romzsa, the martyr bishop of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo.

⁴ P. BLET, *XII. Pius és a második világháború a Vatikán archívumai alapján* [Pius XII and the Second World War based on the Vatican's archives], Budapest 1997, pp. 290–316; F. SZABÓ, *A Vatikán keleti politikája közéről. Az Ostpolitik színe és visszája* [Examining the Vatican's Eastern Policy: The pros and cons of the Ostpolitik], Budapest 2012, pp. 58–60.

⁵ DERŽAVNIJ ARCHIV ZAKARPATSKOJ OBLASTI [State Archive of the Transcarpathian Oblast] (= DAZO), 151. fond. 24. opis. Nr 975, f. 1. *For the clergy of Máramaros and Ugocsa. Khust, May 18, 1944*; f. 4. *For the clergy of Bereg. Mukachevo, June 1, 1944*; f. 7. *For the clergy of Ung and Zemplén. Uzhhorod, June 15, 1944.*

⁶ Cf. BENDÁSZ-HAGYATÉK [Bendász legacy], *Bendász István hagyatéki iratai* [Legacy documents of István Bendász] Nr. 1725, *Notes on the instructions given at the meeting in Khust.*

several other important liturgical texts.⁷ Priests received further instruction in the form of Prince Primate Jusztinián Serédi’s fall appeal to the Hungarian Catholic clergy, calling on them to remain in their posts in accordance with their oaths and even “at the price of martyrdom.”⁸

As the war front drew ever closer, it became increasingly difficult for the Church to maintain contact and thus to direct the two eparchies; therefore, Bishop Dudás asked the Holy See to appoint a bishop to head the Eparchy of Mukachevo. After the arrival of the Red Army and the introduction of martial law, the Vatican acknowledged that it could no longer delay the appointment of a new bishop, as Bishop Dudás was evidently unable to perform his duties.

A month or so after his episcopal ordination on September 24, 1944, the Soviets began to exert pressure on Tódor Romzsa, the new head of the Eparchy; consequently, the beginning of the persecution of the Greek Catholic Church can be dated to the enthronement of Bishop Tódor. As Konstantin Szabó tells us in his oral history,

The new regime came into being in October 1944 with the invasion of the Soviet forces. At the time, Tódor Romzsa had been bishop for barely a month. He was thirty-three years of age, Christ’s age at the time of his crucifixion. On November 7, the new “masters” the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution with great pomp. At the celebration, they forced Bishop Romzsa to salute the army and its commander, Stalin. They wanted him to offer thanks for the liberation; to declare the unity of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Transcarpathian peoples; to call on young people to join the Red Army; and to request the fulfilment of the centuries-old desire of the people of Transcarpathia, namely the annexation of the region to the Ukraine. A military officer demanded all this from the bishop in a firm tone that would not tolerate dissent. He then added that if the bishop failed to meet the request, there would be severe consequences for the entire Greek Catholic diocese.

In his book titled *Romzsa Tódor élete és halála* [The life and death of Tódor Romzsa], Father László Puskás quoted the diplomatic words then spoken

⁷ PUSKÁS, *Romzsa Tódor élete és halála*, p. 94. The liturgy was published here: *Божественная литургия иже во святых отца нашего Иоанна Златоуста* [Divine liturgy of the saints of our Holy Father John Chrysostom], Uzhhorod 1944.

⁸ The appeal of Jusztinián Serédi, Archbishop of Esztergom to the Catholic clergy was published in the newspaper *Nemzeti Újság* [National Newspaper] on October 10, 1944. Cf. BENDÁSZ-HAGYATÉK, Nr. 1726.

by Bishop Romzsa: “We must thank the Heavenly Father that the war has not imposed excessive sacrifices and trauma on Transcarpathia and that the gunfire did not bring fear, because we knew that the fraternal people bringing us liberty is one whose language and customs are familiar to us.”⁹ The chief pastor expressed gratitude to the great leader, Stalin, for the liberation, and wished him success on the path leading to peace. The next day, the regional newspaper *Zakarpatszka Ukrajna* [Transcarpathian Ukraine] published a lengthy report on the event. In the report, the bishop’s speech was altered to include the content that had been demanded in advance by the organizers, according to which Romzsa too wished for the region’s annexation to the Ukraine. Romzsa immediately protested to the editorial board, stressing that he had not said this. The response was as follows: “Yes, you did not say it, but you should have done so!” Bishop Romzsa quickly understood that there was no sense in cooperating with the regime. The Soviet communist system and ideology were founded on lies.

By the 1940s, the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo (Munkács) had become well developed in an organizational sense, possessing a network of institutions. After several centuries of development and amid the specific historical conditions of the region, the Eparchy exercised jurisdiction over four counties in North-Eastern Hungary. When the persecution of the churches began in the fall of 1944, there were 480,888 congregants in the Eparchy, with 381 priests serving in 321 parishes (and 442 branch churches).¹⁰ According to the data, the following institutions were operating in the Eparchy in 1943: the Theological College and Seminary, the Greek Catholic Cantor Training Institute, the Greek Catholic Primary School Teacher Training Institute, the Convictus, the Alumneum in Uzhorod, and the Alumneum in Khust. The Eparchy also ran a secondary boarding school in Mukachevo, a boarding facility for trainee primary school teachers, a girls’ boarding school, and several orphanages – Erzsébetház [Elizabeth House], Szent Család Árvaház [Holy Family Orphanage], and Huszti Árvaház [Orphanage of Khust].¹¹ There

⁹ PUSKÁS, *Romzsa Tódor élete és halála*, p. 103.

¹⁰ *Brevis schematismus dioceseos Munkaciensis byzantini ritus in Uzhorod ad annum 1945*, manuscript, forthcoming.

¹¹ Gy. PILINYI, *A Magyarországi Latin és Görög Szertartású világi és Szerzetes Római Katolikus papság névtára és az országos hivatalok útmutatója* [Register of the names of Latin and Greek Rite secular and monastic Roman Catholic priests in Hungary and a guide to the National Offices], Budapest 1943, pp. 51–63.

were church schools in all parishes of the Eparchy and in the larger branch parishes, with pupils being taught by cantor teachers. In view of the large number of church institutions and the Eparchy’s centuries-old embeddedness in society, it was a logical step for the Soviet regime to demand the loyalty of the Greek Catholic Church, which it viewed as a prerequisite for establishing the new social order.

2.2. The functioning of the Eparchy from the beginning of religious persecution until its full implementation

In the Transcarpathian region, the construction of the new social and political regime began in October 1944, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet invasion.¹² Although the clergy in the Eparchy were soon subjected to various kinds of pressure, the period between 1944 and 1946 was characterized more by political trials than by overt religious repression. The authorities primarily took steps against those priests who had performed social or political functions in the preceding period.¹³

The Eparchy’s first martyr was Péter Pál Demjanovics, the 76-year-old Dean of Rakhiv (Rahó) and a member of the Hungarian Parliament: on Good Friday, April 23, 1945, he was shot dead in his bed by a prison officer named Mária K. at the prison in Uzhhorod.¹⁴ István Fenczik, who was also a member of the Hungarian parliament and had held various public offices, was executed in the prison at Uzhhorod between June 3 and 14, 1946. Prior to his execution, efforts had been made to persuade him to convert to the Pravoslav (Eastern Orthodox) Church in return for a bishopric. Fenczik had firmly rejected these offers as follows: “A Greek Catholic priest cannot sink

¹² D. E. MOLNÁR, *Kárpátaljai Magyarok a Szovjetunió hadifogoly- és munkatáboráiban (1944–1953)* [Transcarpathian Hungarians in the Prisoner and Forced Labor Camps of the Soviet Union (1944–1953)], PhD dissertation, Debrecen 2015, pp. 40–82; J. BOTLIK, *Egestas Subcarpathica. Adalékok az Északkeleti-Felvidék és Kárpátalja XIX–XX. századi történetéhez* [Egestas Subcarpathica. Supplements to the nineteenth and twentieth century history of the north-eastern part of Upper Hungary and Transcarpathia], Budapest 2000, p. 284.

¹³ There were several Greek Catholic priests among the former members of the Hungarian Parliament who were arrested in 1946 and then executed or martyred in the ensuing period, including Sándor Ilniczky (1889–1947), a Greek Catholic priest, canon, and provost; Jenő Ortutay (1889–December 24, 1950), a Greek Catholic priest, archdeacon, and former mayor of Berehove (Beregszász); and Dr. István Fenczik (1892– March 30, 1946), a Greek Catholic priest and theology teacher.

¹⁴ BENDÁSZ–BENDÁSZ, *Helytállás és tanúságtétel*, pp. 112–116.

so low!”¹⁵ On November 24, 1946, Father Péter Legeza was called to attend a sick person; the next day he was found dead, having sustained broken ribs and a fracture in his hand. There were signs of strangulation on his neck.¹⁶ On June 19, 1947, Sándor Ilniczky died under suspicious circumstances in Tomsk.¹⁷ On July 28, 1947, János Keselya was convicted; in the same year, he became a martyr for the Greek Catholic Church under unknown circumstances near Tashkent.¹⁸ In 1945, many priests were detained on political grounds, including Jenő Ortutay, archdeacon of Uzhhorod and a member of the Hungarian Parliament, and Miklós Mondy, the parish priest of Berehove (Beregszász).¹⁹ Expressions such “suspicious circumstances” and “unknown circumstances” were commonly heard, which indicated that the Soviet authorities were prepared to use any means to achieve their ends. It should also be noted that the men in question were “removed” prior to the murder of Bishop Romzsa.²⁰

Beginning in 1945, the communist authorities put even greater pressure on the Eparchy. The conditions created by the regime were designed to persuade people that the Greek Catholic Church had become an obstacle to Soviet peace ambitions. Both bishops and the ordinary clergy were subjected to various types of pressure and intentional harassment.

The Soviet regime favored the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox Church to the detriment of Greek Catholics. It denied registration to the Greek Catholic Church, citing the fact that the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo (Munkács) belonged to a church that had no main center on the territory of the Soviet Union. Bishop Romzsa was regularly summoned to government offices, receiving “invitations” designed to increase the pressure incrementally. He was thus required to appear for a “discussion,” then for an “important discussion,” and finally for a “very important discussion.” Typically, there was only a short interval between the “summons” and the timing of the obligatory

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 148–152.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 220–223.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 178–184.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 202–205.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 493.

²⁰ Concerning the detentions and convictions, our primary sources are people’s recollections and the relevant court documents. Cf. BENDÁSZ–BENDÁSZ, *Helytállás és tanúságtétel*. The most recent, expanded version of the monograph by Dániel Bendász includes an analysis of the court documents.

meeting. In this manner, the bishop was made to feel that he should be ready and available to political leadership at any time.²¹

On August 28, 1947, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary according to the Julian calendar, when Bishop Romzsa was about to set out for the cathedral in Mukachevo, the authorities refused to issue him a travel permit. At the time, whenever he left his episcopal seat, he was obliged to request the consent of the State Office for Church Affairs while the authorities observed his every move. The increasing pressure culminated in the bishop’s murder on October 31, 1947. After the initial atrocity, which was disguised as an accident, the regime ultimately executed the bishop by arranging for him to be injected with an overdose of tubocurare.²²

The state authorities were confident that after the “murder of the pastor, the flock would scatter.” However, the regime was still unable to bring the Greek Catholic Church to its knees or to establish an “initiative group” like the one in neighboring Galicia (*iniziativa gruppá*), which had been established as part of the process of eliminating the Greek Catholic Church in that region. The Greek Catholic Eparchy of Lviv had been assimilated by the Pravoslav (Eastern Orthodox) Church at a sham “reunion” synod; in Transcarpathia, however, there was no synod or general assembly that might have proclaimed a rupture with Rome and a union with Moscow. Moreover, none of the clergy publicly called for such a move. In line with the instructions received by the clergy from Bishop Miklós Dudás in the late summer of 1944 and then at the clergy conference, Greek Catholic priests serving in Transcarpathia remained in their posts. Albeit in fear, the Greek Catholic Church continued to function, resisting the pressure for another year.

After the death of Bishop Romzsa, the chapter elected Miklós Murányi as vicar apostolic in order to shift attention from Sándor Chira (Alexander Chira), whom Bishop Romzsa had consecrated as bishop in December

²¹ DAZO 151. fond 25. opis, Nr. 3375. Examples of these summons can also be found in the archives of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo. The dates of dispatch and the tight deadlines are noteworthy: “Send a representative by 12 midday on February 4, 1946!” (sent on February 2); “Present yourself for a discussion on December 11, 1946 (room 216, fourth floor!)” (sent on December 11); “Present yourself by 11 am on December 18, 1946!” (sent on December 17); “Present yourself for a discussion of an important matter on February 10, 1947!” (sent on February 8); “Present yourself in an important matter on March 25, 1947!” (sent on March 24); “Present yourself in an important matter on August 7, 1947!” (sent on August 6); “Present yourself in an important matter by 3 pm this afternoon, August 20, 1947!”

²² PUSKÁS, *Romzsa Tódor élete és halála*, pp. 229–252.

1945.²³ Murányi told the state authorities that he would never agree to a union with the Eastern Orthodox Church. In response, Ivan Turyanytsia, the chairman of the People's Council of Transcarpathian Ukraine issued a decree stipulating that Uzhhorod Cathedral and all rooms of the bishop's palace, including furnishings, should be attributed to the Russian Orthodox Church. On February 17, 1949, representatives of the local authorities accompanied by KGB agents and guards broke into the bishop's palace. A pastoral letter then appeared that, according to his memoirs, Murányi did not sign, even though the letter bore what appeared to be his signature. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Brethren! On February 17, 1949, at the request of the faithful, Uzhhorod Cathedral and the premises of the bishop's office were transferred into the ownership of the Pravoslav Church. For this reason, the office is to cease operations and my work as vicar apostolic has also come to an end. Please take note of the above. May the abundant blessing of God rest upon you, and requesting your holy prayers, I shall remain in Uzhhorod.

Miklós Murányi, February 18, 1949.²⁴

The above quoted pastoral letter dated February 18, 1949 thus marks the beginning of the overt persecution of the Church and the last act in the process by which the Eparchy was forced underground.

3. The Clandestine Church

The regime's hostile stance forced the Church to secretly nominate several successor bishops before the wave of persecution began. Throughout

²³ M. Riskó, *Chira Sándor (1897–1983) munkácsi püspök élete és vértanúsága* [The life and martyrdom of Sándor Chira (1897–1983), Bishop of Mukachevo], Budapest 2017, pp. 128–129.

²⁴ Between May and August 1957, Canon István Bendász was in voluntary exile in Karaganda, where he and Murányi shared accommodation. Murányi told him that the letter was fabricated by the authorities, who had seized the bishop's palace and acquired Murányi's seal and stationery. They used the stationery to write the letter, which they concluded with a rather clumsy duplicate of Murányi's signature. Cf. BENDÁSZ–BENDÁSZ, *Helytállás és tanúságtétel*, p. 280.

the period of the clandestine church, Greek Catholic leadership sought to ensure the presence of several bishops in the Eparchy, thus guaranteeing the ordination of priests as well as apostolic continuity in the event of one of the bishops being prevented from travelling. Based on various memoirs, during the first period of the clandestine Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, there were three serving bishops. One of them, Sándor Chira, was imprisoned as a confessor of the faith, while the other two – Péter Orosz (Petro Oros) and Bazil József Zavagyák – were martyred.

We have only anecdotal evidence for the episcopal consecration of Péter Orosz and the Basilian monk Bazil József Zavagyák, but Orosz, who was shot dead by a member of the local militia (police) named Pócsik at Zarichchya (Alsókaraszló) in the Irshava (Ilosva) district on August 27, 1953, was referred to in various sources as a bishop. Pócsik buried the corpse in a garage adjacent to the police car park.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Basilian monk Bazil Zavagyák was sent to a prison camp, and after his release in June 1956, he worked clandestinely for two years. The KGB sought to persuade him to leave Transcarpathia or to retire to an Orthodox monastery. After he rejected these offers, on the morning of December 4, 1958, Zavagyák was run over by a truck at a junction near the village of Rokosovo (Rakasz), whereupon three men jumped out of the truck and beat him with iron bars. He died from his injuries at the hospital in Khust. It is presumed that Péter Orosz and Bazil Zavagyák were killed because the regime suspected that they were bishops.²⁶ In neither case did the Holy See confirm that they had been bishops, but that does not alter the fact of their martyrdom for the Catholic faith.

The spiritual father and leader of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo was Sándor Chira, who worked in the clandestine church for decades and was known and admired by everyone. After his release from a Soviet prison camp, he returned to Transcarpathia, but a year later, the authorities expelled him from the region, citing his organizational activities as a priest. He settled in Karaganda, where he undertook priestly duties for the rest of his life, making occasional return visits to the Eparchy of Mukachevo. Although Miklós Murányi continued to serve as vicar apostolic in the Eparchy, its spiritual leader and director remained Sándor Chira, who also ordained priests during the years of the clandestine church. By the time

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 286–294.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 462–466.

of his death in 1983, Chira had consecrated three bishops and sixteen priests in the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo.

The first secret ordination of a priest took place on November 7, 1956, at the time of the anniversary celebrations for the Great October Socialist Revolution. This point in time can also be regarded as marking the revival of the Eparchy, since according to Church custom, the consecration of a priest symbolizes apostolic continuity. Chira ordained four former seminarians, whose ordination had been put on hold by the onset of religious persecution and the death of Bishop Romzsa; these four men were József Stilicha, János Csépes, Konstantin Szabó (who later became a bishop), and Mihály Bugir. Thereafter, church life could resume based on the “catacomb model” of the early Church.

Sándor Chira consecrated Konstantin Szabó²⁷ as bishop in 1977 and János Szemedi as bishop in 1978, who then became an ordinary after 1983. In 1983, Chira ordained József Halavács as bishop, who worked as an auxiliary bishop. Finally, in 1987, János Margitics was consecrated as bishop in Galicia.

In Transcarpathia, the activities of the clandestine church were reorganized around three centers – Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, and Berehove –, where Chira also played a leading role in the reorganizational work.²⁸ When, having received permission from the authorities, he made his occasional visits to the region, he would go to the three centers and keep in contact with the clergy.

Concerning the priests who had signed the statement of affiliation with the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox Church between 1949 and 1953 and formally came under its auspices, it should be noted that many of them subsequently returned to the Greek Catholic Church. Factors contributing to this process were the revival of contacts with those priests who returned from the gulags after 1956, the respect shown by congregants to such priests, and the fact that the former Greek Catholic intelligentsia and the steadfast clergy remaining in Transcarpathia tended to reject and disparage the apostate priests.

Even during the clandestine period, the Greek Catholic Church provided opportunities for apostate priests to return to Catholicism. This process began in the Eparchy of Lviv under Bishop Mykolay Charnetsky, and the practice was also adopted by the community of Greek Catholic clergy in Transcarpathia. A priest wishing to return to the Greek Catholic Church had

²⁷ Bishop Konstantin Szabó was the paternal uncle of Konstantin Szabó, one of the co-authors of this paper.

²⁸ Interview with Terézia Lyachovics in Mukachevo, June 15, 2016.

to take such practical steps as submitting a petition to the Pravoslav bishop ending his ties to the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox Church, and then had to submit a petition to the vicar apostolic requesting his return to the Greek Catholic Church. At a designated church, he was subsequently required to confess and then publicly take Communion, thereby expressing his union with the Catholic Church. Some of the “signed up” priests appear to have kept their posts in their – now Eastern Orthodox – churches, but refrained from partaking in Pravoslav church services and events.

There remains a lack of knowledge about the objective and subjective grounds and circumstances that led priests to join the Pravoslav Church and then to return to the Catholic fold. Much research is required in this field; it can, however, be stated that those priests who made the return contributed to the preservation of Greek Catholic identity during the decades of religious repression.

4. The Clergy and Their Families under Persecution

4.1. The emotional aspects of persecution

The societal changes in Transcarpathia and the introduction of a Soviet-type social and political system occurred under the direction of the organs of state power. As already mentioned, a starting point in this process was the state’s refusal to register the Greek Catholic Church, the most influential religious denomination in local society. Instead, the authorities sought to coercively merge the Greek Catholics with the Moscow-based Pravoslav (Eastern Orthodox) Church, which had already been placated and rendered loyal to the Soviet state. The Greek Catholic clergy and laity overwhelmingly rejected the forced merger; therefore, to Soviet leadership, a priest’s loyalty to the Catholic Church and its visible head, the Pope became a benchmark by which he was judged. This criterion thus determined the fates and livelihoods of the clergy and their families.

Until the murder of Bishop Romzsa on October 31, 1947, the policy of the Soviet authorities had been to accomplish the organizational merger of the Eparchy. In order to influence the senior clergy, they had repeatedly cited the political collaboration of prominent figures. After the death of Bishop Romzsa, however, there was a change in approach, and the authorities put even greater pressure on the lower clergy of deans and parish priests, and by extension on their families. This process might best be understood by

examining personal recollections of the era. The decisions taken by the steadfast priests were rooted in their deep Christian faith and commitment; a tension thus arose between the state authorities, whose approach was a pragmatic one, and the clergy, most of whom viewed the issue of conceding to government pressure as a matter of faith and principle. They interpreted Christ's words, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross" as a call to make a decision about their own conduct. The desire to follow Christ and a commitment to Catholicism became manifest in the lives of the clergy as matters of faith and existentiality: an acceptance of suffering signified a priest's enduring loyalty to the Catholic Church, while altering one's religion was tantamount to collaboration with the atheistic state power and apostasy.

Through discussions with the steadfast priests and in their written recollections, their spirituality has been recorded for posterity. Rather than viewing themselves as heroes, they were thankful to God for his mercy in giving them the strength and endurance to remain steadfast to the Catholic faith and to their moral values even during the period of persecution and at a time when the regime was quite prepared to use physical force. In the words of Konstantin Szabó,

The theological professor Dr. Elemér Ortutay, who was my teacher and educator and under whose direction I completed my studies, told me that if [his interrogators] had laid so much as a finger on him or had applied any amount of force, it is not certain he would have withstood it.

4.2. The reaction of the clergy to persecution

Based on their decisions, we can divide the clergy affected by persecution into three groups: 1) steadfast priests who were sentenced to prison or forced labor, 2) steadfast priests who were not convicted or sent to the prison camps, 3) priests who converted to the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox faith. Within these three groups, further subgroups can be identified, the attributes of which could be the subject of further analysis.

The first of the above groups comprised 127 steadfast priests who refused to sign the statement of affiliation with the Pravoslav (Eastern Orthodox) Church and were therefore sentenced to prison or forced labor. The death penalty as a form of punishment was abolished in the Soviet Union in 1947, with the most severe punishment being determined by Section 54.4 and the second part of Section 54.10 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR. Most

of the priests were thus sentenced to twenty-five years in a correction camp and to five years of civil deprivation and the confiscation of property.²⁹ Thirty of those sentenced to prison or to a prison camp (including Bishop Romzsa) became martyrs, with twenty-five of them being buried in unmarked graves.

In addition to the priests who had become martyrs, there were some who died in the prison camps owing to illness or old age. This group includes 74-year-old Tivadar Kohutics who, upon hearing that he was free and could return home, died from joy. His earthly remains are in an unmarked grave in Abez in the Komi Republic.³⁰ Jenő Ortutay died on Christmas Eve on December 24, 1950, and his remains are also buried in Abez. As there was no other priest at the gulag, his burial was performed by a Jewish rabbi. The notion of "unmarked graves" exacerbates the pain of the families and the Greek Catholic Church.

In cases where priests were deported and died away from their homes, the suffering of family members is heightened by the fact that the wives, children, and grandchildren have nowhere to remember their deceased loved ones. They are left with the following sombre vision: "As well as being very barren and cold, Siberia is a huge cemetery. It is the international cemetery of communist Soviet terror." The clergy of the Greek Catholic Church are among the manifold Siberian victims of that terror.

The second group of steadfast priests comprises fifty members of the clergy who, to use an ironic turn of phrase, "evaded punishment." Although they refused to sign up for the merger and remained loyal to the Catholic Church, they were, for whatever reason, neither detained nor convicted. Evidently, their sufferings cannot be compared with the horrors and inhumanities of the gulag. Even so, the dread of arrest haunting the fifty priests and their families resulted in a pervasive sense of insecurity. This fear was particularly intense until the death of Stalin in 1953. As Konstantin Szabó recollects,

I personally knew – and still know – families who lived through this period. Those who had been detained had already got through it, as it were. Those who had not been detained, however, got up in the mornings and went to bed at night in the knowledge that they might be hauled off at any moment. They could not know who would be next and when their turn might come.

²⁹ Gy. DUPKA, *Koncepciók perek magyar elítélteji* [Hungarians convicted in political trials], Budapest – Uzhhorod 1993, p. 62.

³⁰ BENDÁSZ–BENDÁSZ, *Helytállás és tanúságtétel*, pp. 207–210.

I know that Miklós Vaszócsik always took with him a small rucksack full of the most necessary items. In his small apartment, which had one main room and a half-room, twelve people were living: he and his wife, who was expecting their sixth child, as well as his mother-in-law, the wife of Miklós Mondí, who also had four children with her. The list may be continued with Pál Karczub, the last parish priest of Vynohradiv (Nagyszőlös), who had sixteen children, or with Pál Medveczky, a priest in a small village, who was the father of nine children. Here we should mention that the preceding group of clergymen – the 127 steadfast priests who were convicted – included 105 priests with families, and there were 396 children in these families.

Beyond the suffering and steadfastness of the bishops and priests who found themselves opposed and persecuted by the communist regime, we should also remember the clergy families who remained steadfast with them. Often family members too fell victim to the same inhumanities, humiliations, and hardships suffered by the head of the family, the priest. Save for a few exceptions, the clergy wives were primary school teachers. On August 30, 1946, the authorities issued a secret decree (known as Decree no. 025), which was then used in 1947 to dismiss all clergy wives from their primary school teaching posts, which was part of an intentional process to disrupt clergy families based on the ideology that clergy wives should not be teaching in schools! The authorities then removed the families from the parochial houses and expropriated the church buildings. Having incrementally removed the income sources of clergy families, the authorities were confident that the clergy wives would persuade their husbands to join the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox Church.

Emotional blackmail and spiritual intimidation were commonly used methods designed to disrupt clergy families. As Konstantin Szabó recalls:

My father was arrested on April 25, 1950. By that time, the family had already been removed from the parochial house and even from the village of Kostryna (Csontos), and had been granted a dwelling in the nearby village of Knyahynya (Knyáhinya). At the time, my mother was twenty-two years old and my elder sister, Ilona, eighteen months old. The harassment of my mother began. The KGB wanted to force her to formally divorce my father, because an “enemy of the people” could not have a wife. It continued with her not being able to find work, because as soon as people found out that her husband was a convicted priest, as well as her father-in-law, she would be dismissed within a couple of days. Her tribulations began in Velykyi

Bereznyi (Nagyberezna) and resumed at various workplaces in Uzhhorod. At one of them, a former seminarian, who had become a government informant or “snitch,” told her that if she agreed to become his lover, he would ensure that she could keep her job. Of course, she rejected his offer. At another place, the KGB offered to provide her work if she agreed to become an informant. Her search for employment then continued in Berehove and Rakhiv, until she finally found a job in Teresva (Taracköz), but even there, she was given a job solely because the company management was based in Kishinev and had no local cadre [personnel] department. Velykyi Bereznyi is Transcarpathia’s westernmost settlement, while Teresva is the easternmost village in the oblast.

It is important to note that a major potential field of research could be an analysis of the feelings, suffering, and hardships experienced by clergy families, which would also serve as a commemoration of their trials and tribulations.

Lastly, the third group of priests comprises those who ultimately signed the statement of affiliation with the Pravoslav or Eastern Orthodox Church. There were 132 members of the clergy in the Eparchy who made the decision to convert; however, fifty-five of these men soon took steps to rectify their relationship with the Eparchy and to return to the Catholic fold. We can thus speak of seventy-seven priests who stuck to their conscious decision to leave Catholicism, or whose early death meant that they had no time to rectify their relationship with the Catholic Church.

5. Conclusion

The Calvary of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo lasted for forty years. The sacrifices of Bishop Romzsa, the thirty-one martyrs, and the steadfast priests were not made in vain: ultimately, the Eparchy underwent a symbolic resurrection. In 1989, albeit reduced in number, sixty-eight priests could take delight in the restoration of opportunities for a fully functioning Greek Catholic Church. Eighteen of these clergymen had attended the “Eastern Academy” (as Uncle Pista Bendász, a historian of the Greek Catholic Church and a priest who remained faithful to Catholicism jokingly referred to the Gulag, where he too had been sent). Sixteen of the priests “evaded” such punishment. Eleven completed – or at least attended for some time – a “proper” seminary, but were ordained clandestinely, and there were twenty-three priests who had been clandestine students of theology – “one-

man theology” students as they were known in Transcarpathia – and had been ordained in secrecy. In this latter group was Konstantin Szabó, one of the authors of this paper, who was ordained clandestinely by Bishop József Halavács in his own home in 1986.

Today, the Eparchy has more than 300 priests, and the Academy of Theology in Uzhhorod bears the name Blessed Tódor Romzsa and is currently attended by sixty-one seminarians. These men are preparing, together with all the other priests in the Eparchy, to pursue the martyr spirit of Bishop Romzsa: “To die for Christ means to live forever.”