

VÁGFALVI, ZOLTÁN CSABA

vagfalvi.zoltan@gmail.com

PhD student (SZTE BTK)

The Summer of Human Smugglers. Fugitives, Profiteers and Highwaymen on the Romanian-Hungarian Border in 1944



ABSTRACT

The German occupation of *Hungary* in 1944 was a tragic turning point for those persecuted by the Nazi regime. This study contributes to the history of Jews and Poles who tried to leave *Hungary* for *Romania* with the help of human smugglers. Along the Hungarian–Romanian border several smuggling networks were operating at this time. One group, which was controlled from Szeged, was apprehended on 3 July 1944. The incident became a public sensation because the main organizers were well-known citizens of the town. The operation of the other smuggling networks was further investigated by the authorities after the Second World War. During these inquiries, it was revealed that in the vicinity of *Csanádpalota*, *Kiszombor*, and *Apátfalva*, some Hungarian state officials cooperating with the German occupiers laid traps for the fugitives and robbed themfugitive. However, some of the organizers and operators of human smuggling, and also some of the officials robbing fugitives can be named owing to archive records, and their activities can more or less be traced as well.

KEYWORDS

World War II, Hungarian–Romanian border, Jewish fugitives, Polish fugitives, human smuggling, people's court

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INTRODUCTION

For the persecuted, hope is one of the most important things to keep holding on to. When the German army invaded *Hungary* on 19 March 1944, the previous hopes of many turned out to be vain. The Jews who had fled to *Hungary* from the territories previously occupied by the Nazis and the disenfranchised Hungarian Jews had hoped that the government would not take their lives and hand them over to their persecutors. When the German occupiers crossed the Hungarian border, a puppet government was established in *Budapest*. And when the ghettos began to be established less than a month later, some of the persecuted refused to accept their fate. One possible, though far from easy way out was towards *Romania*, where the otherwise pro-German government stopped deportations after 1942. According to a report made in *Bucharest*, from the beginning of the deportations in *Hungary* until the end of December 1944, around 1500 Hungarian Jews crossed the Hungarian–Romanian border illegally.¹ It was an escape route not only for Jews but also for Poles, who were taken in by *Hungary* after their country was annexed by *Germany* and the *Soviet Union* in 1939. The hope of escape became a market demand. Smuggling networks were organized in *Romania* and *Hungary*. The smugglers were willing to offer a chance to flee for the right price. Many of the human smugglers were most probably satisfied with the amount they received from the fugitives. However, some realized that the fugitives may be in possession of a lot more valuables than what they would give their helpers. They were the ones who abused their position of power, negotiated with a few smugglers, and then captured, robbed, and ultimately deprived their victims of even the hopes of survival. In my paper, I present some cases that occurred on the Hungarian–Romanian border around *Csanádpalota*, *Kiszombor*, and *Apátfalva* during the summer of 1944.

The topic is not new. Researchers have examined the daily lives and the fate of the Poles who fled to *Hungary* and also the efforts of the Hungarians who helped them. One of these scholars, *István Lagzi* revealed the specific case of human smuggling that also marks the starting point of this paper.² Despite this, the reanalysis is justified by the fact that *Lagzi* used only resources originating in the summer of 1944 and concentrated on the activities of a single organization called the *Skultéty Group*. However, this is only one part of the story. I emphasize that he undertook no more than to present the aspects of hiding and helping the Poles persecuted by the Germans, including the Jews in *Szeged*. His analysis includes detailed descriptions of the content of the sources and the documentation of the events but engages in little evaluation.

Having reviewed the archival sources used by *Lagzi*, I came to the conclusion that he processed them accurately. That is the reason why I refer to *Lagzi's* book, not the archives

¹ BRAHAM 1997.

² LAGZI 2009. *Lagzi* dealt with the subject at an earlier time as well (LAGZI 1979).

themselves. I make exceptions whenever I provide data that are not mentioned by *Lagzi*. The documents I have processed are ones from the *People's Prosecutor's Office* and the *People's Court* casefiles.³ Since these state organisations operated under significant communist political pressure in the years following World War II, their activities and the documents they produced should be considered with this in mind. I supplement the archival documents mainly with heavily screened press reports. The filtering was necessary because of the conflicting, sensationalist articles of the newspapers, misinterpreting and misrepresenting information. I deemed, although with reservations, what remained after the process suitable to provide nuances to the case files. My writing presents the main courses of the events.

1. THE SKULTÉTY GROUP

To begin with, let us summarize briefly the findings of *Lagzi*.⁴ His sources were mostly the interrogation records and investigative documents that were created after the capture of the group but before the arrival of the Soviet army.⁵ Some of the records are in German because they were taken by the occupying authorities. *Lagzi* supplemented those with media reports and other documents.

After the German occupation of *Hungary* on 19 March 1944, several illegal groups organized the escape of Poles and Jews abroad. One of the important stations on the route was *Szeged*. Despite the fact that the *Gestapo*, the security service (*SD*) and the security police (*SiPo*) had all established themselves in the city. The fugitives were sent from *Budapest* to *Szeged* under the direction of a Pole called *Bohdan Stypiński*.⁶ It is worth remembering his name his personality later underwent a strange transformation.

The establishment of the organization which *Lagzi* called *Skultéty Group* was actually initiated by *Mihály Iván*, the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Szegedi Új Nemzedék*.⁷ In May 1944, three Polish men appeared in front of *Iván*, who had had relations with *Poland* for a long time, and on behalf of *Stypiński*, the men asked him to help “the Polish youth” escape to *Turkey* through *Romania*. *Iván* immediately remembered his old friend who was indebted to him, *Sándor Skultéty*, the director of the *Tourism Office of Szeged*.⁸ Being under the assumption that Polish children

³ The people's prosecutor's offices were the prosecution offices working in tandem with the people's courts. The people's courts were set up in 1945 to investigate war crimes and crimes against the people. Most of the cases mentioned in this paper were presented before the *People's Prosecutor's Office of Szeged*. The proceedings of the cases were held in the *People's Court of Szeged*, or in one case in its affiliate council in *Makó*.

⁴ LAGZI 2009.

⁵ HU-MNL-CSML-KL IV.1401.a. 169/1944.

⁶ I use the Polish names as they were used by *Lagzi*. *Bohdan Stypiński* was the vice president of an organisation managing the affairs of Poles in Hungary, the *Komitet Obywatelski dla Spraw Opieki nad Polskimi Uchodźcami na Węgrzech*, and he was the *Budapest* representative of the *Minister of Finance of the Polish government-in-exile*.

⁷ The paper *Szegedi Új Nemzedék* was in circulation between 1919 and 1944. It published antiliberal, often coarsely anti-Semitic articles. It received significant subsidies from the government, it was the mouthpiece of the regime.

⁸ *Sándor Skultéty* (1900–1976) was the perfect man for the position. He was a conspirationist figure with good knowledge of languages, an extensive network of contacts, appealing manners and looks, not to mention that he was daring bordering on being irresponsible. He was on good terms with the occupying Germans, he also provided interpretation services to them, no doubt in hopes of advances in his career and finances. Due to his shady businesses and love affairs he was known in town as “*the Stavisky of Szeged*” or “*the Little Stavisky*” alluding to *Alexandr Stavisky* (1886–1934), the Ukrainian born French businessman, swindler, and scandalizer. In any case, he was luckier than the “real” *Stavisky* because he did not end up with a bullet in his head but died in quiet seclusion in *Balatonalmádi* (ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-30271).

had to be smuggled across the border, *Skultéty* recruited farmers from the area, as well as taxi drivers from *Szeged*. He also arranged temporary housing in private homes, a tourist hostel, and a girls' hostel. In the confessions of *Skultéty* from the summer of 1944, he mentioned 5 smuggling routes, and 55 people fleeing, which was changed a few days later to only 35– to 40. *Lagzi* had reservations about the number of people smuggled because, in his view, *Skultéty* was trying to diminish his own responsibility. During the organizing stages he did not even entertain the idea of rescuing Jews, and the sentiment was supposedly shared by *Iván* as well. In any case, following their arrest they denied knowing about Jews having been among the fugitives. *Iván* even boasted about his unadulterated anti-Semitism. *Skultéty* was also disturbed by the fact that most of the fugitives referred to him were not children as stated in the original request. The rescue operations were probably financed by the organizers in *Budapest*. It seems that *Skultéty* made good money with this and other not quite lawful transactions, even though he had to hand over some of the money to the taxi drivers and smugglers.

The fugitives arrived from *Budapest* to *Szeged* by train. From the station, *Skultéty* or one of his assistants accompanied them to their temporary accommodation. They were also transported by train from *Szeged* to the villages along the Romanian border. From there, the smugglers escorted them to *Romania*. The taxis were needed to transport the fugitives within *Szeged* and to take *Skultéty* and his helpers back to the city from the border. That was the plan during the last operation that brought the group down as well. On July 3 1944, *Skultéty* escorted a group of seven fugitives to *Csanádpalota*. Their train departed from *Szeged* at around 7 p.m. They stayed in a restaurant in *Csanádpalota* until about 10 p.m., when they went back to the train station where they were supposed to meet the human smuggler. Instead, gendarmes arrived and took the group into custody, including *Skultéty* and the taxi driver waiting for him. The next day, they were interrogated in *Szeged* by inspectors from the *SD* and *SiPo*, while the other members of the group, who had not participated in the previous evening's operation, were also detained. From the German-language records processed by *Lagzi*, we know the names of those arrested in *Csanádpalota*: *Stanisław Rzepko-Łaski*, a Polish Jesuit monk, a major, one of the organizers of the rescue operations. *Halina Rokita*, *Roman Nowakowski*, *Roman Machowski*, and *Helena Marchewka* were all Poles and probably Catholics. There were also two Hungarian women in the group: *Erika Mann* and *Éva Annamária Iritz*, who came from Jewish families. *Mann* was baptized at the age of 7 but was considered a Jew under Hungarian law. Although *Skultéty* swore to both the German and the Hungarian authorities that he had not known about Jews being among the fugitives, there is no way that he would not have been suspicious of the two Hungarian women. But since they also came through the intermediation of the Poles, he probably received money after them as well, turning a blind eye to the matter. It could have been due to the fact that they were two young women, and *Skultéty* was usually quite fond of ladies.

Here ends the brief summary of the facts that can be learned from the work of *István Lagzi*. Now let us add everything that has come to light from the documents after the war, and at the same time let us take a look at some other human smuggling cases besides the one in *Csanádpalota*.

2. A PHONE CALL IN CSANÁDPALOTA

Csanádpalota, located near the Romanian border, was under increased official control during the summer of 1944. In the last days of June, the stationmaster of the *Csanádpalota* railway station received instructions from the stationmaster of the *Szeged* railway station of the *Royal Hungarian State Railways* via phone to pay special attention to any suspected spies appearing close to the border and possibly trying to escape. For this reason, *Dániel Cs. Endes* did not hesitate when he noticed people idling near the station late at night on July 3. In accordance with the instructions received from *Szeged*, he notified the gendarmerie station of *Csanádpalota* via phone. The gendarmes arrived at the train station around 11 p.m. and apprehended the members of the suspected group.⁹ That was the last time *Cs. Endes* saw them. Until his interrogation in the *People's Prosecutor's Office* in February 1946, he did not even know who they were, he only remembered a Jesuit monk among them.¹⁰

By January 1946, *Skultéty's* memories had also undergone some transformation as compared to his testimony in 1944. This is not only due to the time elapsed. In the days after his arrest, in front of his German interrogators and the Hungarian authorities, he understandably tried to downplay the magnitude of the smuggling case and the role he played in it. A year and a half later, he recognized that the situation had changed. He was now trying to portray himself as someone who had saved lives. He also had to convince the new authorities that he was not one of those who robbed the fugitives and gave them up to the armed forces. Based on *Lagzi's* research, we can safely say that this is true.¹¹

During his interrogation at the *People's Prosecutor's Office* in January 1946, *Skultéty* said that the group detained in *Csanádpalota* had consisted of 15 people. He talked about 11 Jews, including a 3- or 4-year-old child, 3 young Polish women, and the Jesuit priest who he claimed to have been called "*Laszky*" and had been the younger brother of the president of the Polish government-in-exile. All of them had been in possession of forged identification papers, which they may have received from a representative of the Polish government-in-exile, a certain "*Count Stipinski*".¹² We can see from the 1944 data that *Skultéty's* story became thoroughly embellished. There were not 15 people, or children, let alone 11 Jews involved. *Stanislaw Rzepko-Laski* was certainly not the younger brother of the leader of the Polish government-in-exile, nor was *Bohdan Stypiński* a count. In October 1946, a newspaper report also wrote quoting *Skultéty* that the "*Polish Count Sztipinszky*" together with the Polish Jesuit monk was among those processed at the gendarmerie station.¹³ In this report, Father "*Laski*" appears as the chap-

⁹ According to *Halina Rokita*, who was among the detained, soldiers also arrived at the train station. Nobody else mentioned this, it could be an error in remembering (LAGZI 2009).

¹⁰ HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946.

¹¹ In this period, the authorities were not interested in *Skultéty* because of human smuggling but because back in 1929 he boasted about having taken part in the 1919 robbery at the *Soviet embassy of Vienna*. A gloriously heroic act in the previous regime had turned into a serious crime in the omniscient eyes of the officers of the expanding communist dictatorship. The investigations against *Skultéty* were in the end terminated (ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-30271).

¹² HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946.

¹³ *Szegedi Kis Újság*, 16 October 1946.

lain of the Warsaw Cathedral and the brother of a leader of the *English Labour Party*.¹⁴ *Skultéty*, who was prone to overstatements, may have tried to prove his heroism to the public adorning his case's participants with never existing titles and connections. It is also possible that the press exaggerated or misunderstood something.

Incidentally, the local newspapers paid a lot of attention to the human smuggling case in as early as 1944. Shortly after the detention of the group in *Csanádpalota*, a newspaper referred to the fugitives as wealthy Polish Jews.¹⁵ There were newspapers that wrote about fugitives dressed in the habits of priests and nuns, while also taking for granted that they were all Jews.¹⁶ These opinions were also confirmed by the investigating *SD* headquarters in *Szeged*: a press release was issued about the arrests, signed by the leader of the *Storm Division*, *I. V. Hunke*. According to this, the group captured in *Csanádpalota* included Polish and Hungarian Jews, amongst them were two people wanted by law, one of them for murder.¹⁷ There is no evidence to suggest the latter except for *Hunke*'s claim.¹⁸

Regarding the events of July 3 1944, several versions emerge from post-war sources.¹⁹ According to the 1946 investigation of the *People's Prosecutor's Office*, the fugitives were taken to *Csanádpalota* by truck, but the stationmaster who had reported the group on the phone was talking about a bus. Neither is true, as they arrived by train. Speaking of the arrest and the hours following it, *Skultéty* himself reported incidents that have no trace in his 1944 testimony.²⁰ He claimed that two people smugglers had appeared almost simultaneously with the arriving gendarmes. At *Skultéty*'s warning, six out of the 15 people as well as the smugglers managed to escape. The remaining 9 people and *Skultéty* were escorted to the gendarmerie station.²¹ Those captured were deprived of all their valuables, stripped naked, beaten to a pulp. At around 8 a.m. the next morning, Lieutenant *Andor Mattyasovszky*, head of the *Makó* counterintelligence branch of the *Royal Hungarian Army V. Corps*, arrived by car. In the corridor, he greeted the Jesuit Father with "*Laudetur Iesus Christus*", and when he answered likewise in Latin, he hit him and knocked him off his feet. Then he had the naked prisoners led before him one by one, and he beat them all with a bull's pizzle whip. *Skultéty* was taken to the interrogation dressed. *Mattyasovszky* showed him a gendarme helmet full of "diamonds and English pound sterlings and dollars." According to *Skultéty*, the lieutenant did not make a list of the confiscated valuables because he wanted to steal them. *Mattyasovszky* reported the capture of the group to the *Gestapo* branch in *Szeged* by phone, in German. Around noon, two German cars and a truck arrived with "four *SS* officers bearing machine guns", a *Gestapo* officer named *Volter* and *Antal*

¹⁴ The president of the *British Labour Party* in 1945-1946 was actually called *Harold Laski* and he did have a brother called *Neville*. However, the *Laskis* were Jewish, so *Neville* cannot have been either a Jesuit priest or a chaplain, let alone one in *Warsaw*. He never showed up on the Romanian-Hungarian border, either in 1944 or at any other time. (See for example: TILLES 2019.)

¹⁵ *Székegy Nép*, 22 July 1944.

¹⁶ *Új Magyarország*, 29 July 1944; *Keleti Magyar Újság*, 18 August 1944.

¹⁷ *Vásárhelyi Reggeli Újság*, 27 July 1944; *Új Magyarország*, 30 July 1944.

¹⁸ LAGZI 2009.

¹⁹ HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946.

²⁰ HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946.

²¹ Let us not forget that in the German records of 1944 7 people are named. Apart from them only *Skultéty* and the taxi driver were interrogated, the number 9 is only possible with the two of them added.

Szabó, a counterespionage ensign. There was another officer with them, whom they called Colonel. In *Szeged*, a woman tried to escape from one of the cars, but she was captured and severely beaten. Eventually, the whole group was taken to the basement of the *Gestapo* building in *Szeged*, from where none of them ever emerged alive.

In the German- and Hungarian-language records of 1944, there is no mention of any lieutenant, undressing, beating, robbing, part of the group fleeing, and *Rzepko-Laski* never mentioned that he had been knocked down either. Of course, it is possible that the detainees did not dare to testify in front of their German interrogators against a Hungarian military officer. Though I mentioned before that *Halina Rokita* had talked about soldiers, but she remembered seeing them all the way back at the train station. The same person reported that they had to undress at the gendarmerie station, a woman frisked them, their clothes and luggage were searched. Their identification papers were taken away, but they received their money and valuables back. Later, “two gentlemen” interrogated them again, and their belongings were searched once more.²² One of the women (*Helena Marchlewka*) did indeed jump out of the car transporting the prisoners but not in *Szeged*, but probably still in *Csanádpalota*.²³ According to her, her birth certificate, her identification paper with a photograph issued in *Hungary* and approximately 1400 pengős were taken away.²⁴ *Sándor Kiss, Jr.*, the taxi driver who was supposed to take *Skultéty* back to *Szeged* and who was also captured said that the gendarmes confiscated 1070 pengős and 30 litres of petrol from him.²⁵ *Skultéty*’s claim that the Poles and Jews captured in *Csanádpalota* never emerged alive from the basement of the *Gestapo* building in *Szeged* is difficult to verify.²⁶ There is only one vague clue, a Polish website dedicated to the martyrs of the Church, which says that *Stanisław Rzepko-Laski* was killed in *Mauthausen* on 28 October 1944.²⁷ It is therefore likely that the captured fugitives were deported from *Szeged* to one of the concentration camps.

Based on all this, we can rightly suspect that *Skultéty* depicted the real incidents partly magnified and partly distorted in 1946. However, the target of the investigators of the *People’s Prosecutor’s Office* was first and foremost not *Skultéty* but *Andor Mattyasovszky*. His person connects the incident of *Csanádpalota* with several other similar cases. These will be the ones discussed in the followings.

3. KISZOMBOR: THE DESERTER AND THE DAY LABOURER

The Calvinist *Ferenc Erdei* (elsewhere *Erdélyi*) fled from *Romania* to *Hungary* as a soldier in 1940. He worked in *Makó* as a dentistry trader.²⁸ In the summer of 1944, a former neighbour from *Romania*, *József Gesztesi*, turned up. At his request, *Erdei* agreed to smuggle Jews from

²² LAGZI 2009.

²³ LAGZI 2009.

²⁴ LAGZI 2009.

²⁵ LAGZI 2009.

²⁶ *Skultéty* and other witnesses generally mentioned the *Gestapo* even though the interrogations were held in the *Szeged* headquarters of the *SD*.

²⁷ <http://www.swzygmunt.knc.pl/MARTYROLOGIUM/POLISHRELIGIOUS/vPOLISH/HTMS/POLISHRELIGIOUSmar-tyr3224.htm> (27 April 2024). The website mistakenly indicated *Budapest* as the place of arrest of the Jesuit priest.

²⁸ The members of this not very populous profession bought and sold false teeth and dentures.

the *Budapest ghetto to Romania at Kiszombor* for 500 pengős per person.²⁹ For the first occasion, he received letters from his former neighbour written in Hebrew, which he had to hand over at the *Niszel* Jewish restaurant in *Budapest* to a teacher of religion named *Groszman*.³⁰ *Groszman* entrusted him with three men. At the border, he handed them over to *Gesztesi*, who took them to *Temesvár* (present day *Timișoara*). From there, he brought verifications of their arrival, with which *Erdei* travelled to *Budapest* again and the process started again from the beginning. *Erdei* made three trips, handing over a total of 20 to 25 Jews to *Gesztesi*. It was only after the liberation of *Budapest* that he was able to present the verifications of the last transport to *Groszman*, who was visiting *Makó*. After the war, *Erdei* was accused by the *People's Prosecutor's Office* of handing over the fugitives to the Hungarian authorities, but they were unable to prove this. The interrogation of *Groszman* was also planned but there is no evidence that it ever happened.³¹ *Erdei's* case differs from that of the *Skultéty Group* in several points. First, he embarked on smuggling Jews specifically, which does not mean that only Hungarian Jews were among those transported to the border. Secondly, he did not build a network but worked solely with his former neighbour. As a result, the risk of being caught was smaller. And this is the third significant difference: *Erdei* remained active until the arrival of the Soviet army.

Another smuggling organization in the *Kiszombor* area worked with a completely different motivation and in a different way. The main organiser of this group was *Péter Szilvási*, a day labourer, who conspired with *Andor Mattyasovszky*, the counterintelligence lieutenant from *Makó*. He also undertook to transport people across the Romanian border for 500 pengős per person. These fugitives also departed from *Budapest* with the help of a first ensign named *János Berkes*, who was *Mattyasovszky's* man. *Berkes* notified *Mattyasovszky* by phone of the arrival of the groups and he had them arrested with border hunters linked to the *Royal Hungarian Army*. *Szilvási* received the 500 pengős per person as a “snitch fee”. Using this method during the summer of 1944, the border hunters of *Kiszombor* captured three transports consisting of Jews and Poles. *Mattyasovszky* and took all the valuables of the deceived people, who were then transported to *Szeged*, to the counterintelligence department of the *Royal Hungarian Army V. Corps*. When its commander, a major called *Vági* determined that the detainees were irrelevant from the point of counterintelligence, he ordered *Mattyasovszky* to ignore human smuggling cases. In all probability, the lieutenant appeared in *Csanádpalota* on the morning of July 4 against orders. According to the summary of the *People's Prosecutor's Office*, *Mattyasovszky* gave up the people sent by *Skultéty* to *Csanádpalota* to the Germans so that Major *Vági* would not learn about them. Nonetheless, the events did not escape the attention of his superior, but due to his fear of the occupiers, *Mattyasovszky* was only “strongly reprimanded”.³² If the deductions of the *People's Prosecutor's Office* were true, it is incomprehensible why *Mattyasovszky* would have thought that his actions would remain undetected. The news of the capture of the *Skultéty Group* quickly spread through the chain of Hungarian offices up to the *Ministry of Interior*. For

²⁹ According to testimonies recorded in human smuggling cases after the war, most of the fugitives started their journey in *Budapest*.

³⁰ In *Budapest*, there indeed was an orthodox Jewish restaurant called *Niszel* in Street *Révay*. According to another testament, the first name of *Groszman* was *Márk* but I could not identify the person in question even with this additional piece of information.

³¹ HU-MNL-CSML-KL NB. 283/1946.

³² HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946.

example, the *Szeged* headquarters of the *Royal Hungarian State Police* was actually notified of the incident by the counterintelligence department of the *V. (Szeged) District Headquarters of the Hungarian Royal Army* on 7 July. *Mattyasovszky* served in this military unit, too.³³

4. APÁTFALVA: THE CHIEF FISHERMAN AND THE GENDARMES

János Tóth L., a chief fisherman from *Apátfalva*, was a character similar to *Péter Szilvási*. He was recruited by *Ferenc Bujáki*, the gendarmerie commander in *Apátfalva* in June 1944, with the aim of helping to bring down the smugglers working at the border. Two or three weeks later, probably sometime in July, *Tóth* notified *Bujáki* that he had been contacted by a Romanian border guard named *Jelina*.³⁴ The person promised 500 pengős per person if the fisherman helped smuggle people across the *River Maros*. Per *Bujáki*'s instructions, *Tóth* received 40 to 45 fake identification cards proving Christian origins and a letter in Hebrew from the Romanian border guard. Suspecting espionage, *Bujáki* reported the incident to the *V. Szeged Gendarmerie District*. *Tóth* travelled to *Budapest* with an inspector from there, and following *Jelina*'s instructions, he met 8 people he was supposed to smuggle across the border. The detective informed *Bujáki* about them by phone. The gendarmes arrested the fugitives in *Apátfalva*. At the gendarmerie station, they confiscated their money and jewellery, which *Bujáki* entered into the records and sealed in an envelope. Then *Andor Mattyasovszky* appeared. He abused these fugitives as well, while demanding *Napoleon* gold coins from them. The next morning, *Bujáki* sent the gendarme inspector, accompanied by two gendarmes and the envelope, to *Szeged*. From there, he received a document attesting to the receipt of the envelope with German signatures. Thus, he assumed that the detainees had been transferred to the *Gestapo*.³⁵ With the assistance of *Tóth* two more groups, a total of 24 people including women and children arrived at the border. They were robbed of about 60,000 pengős, 300–400 dollars, and a lot of jewellery. This is based on the testimony of *Ferenc Bujáki* in 1945, but *Tóth* made similar claims to the investigators of the *People's Prosecutor's Office*, at least at first.³⁶ He also reported three groups arriving from *Budapest*, but in the second and third transports he believed there to have been only 10 to 15 people. *Tóth* kept the 500 pengős per person he received for smuggling but gave some of it to the gendarme inspector who accompanied him to *Budapest*. In January 1946, the report of the *Makó Police Political Department* indicated that the three groups transported to the border included 20 to 25 people altogether, all of whom were Jews from *Budapest*. The confessions of *Tóth* and *Bujáki* underwent curious transformations by the

³³ HU-MNL-CSML-KL IV.1401.a. 169/1944.

³⁴ The name *Jelina* is from *Bujáki*'s testament for the people's prosecutor's office. *Tóth* mentioned the same person as *Milután* (HU-MNL-CSML-KL NB. 283/1946).

³⁵ According to the summary found among the case files of *Dániel Cs. Endes*, the people detained in *Apátfalva* ended up at the gendarmerie headquarters of *Szeged*. The unknown author of the summary implied that *Mattyasovszky* handed over to the Germans only those whom he had managed to rob of all their valuables. This is in line with the idea that *Mattyasovszky* wanted to hide his private undertakings from his superiors, that is why he deemed it better after a while to refer the fugitives to the German authorities. (HU-MNL-CSML-KL XXV.8.Nb.361/1946)

³⁶ *Bujáki* knew of the incident in *Csanádpalota*, with a distinct difference: he spoke of 12 people, of which three escaped. The remaining 9 were Jews according to him as well, and all ended up at the *Gestapo*. *Bujáki* mentioned *Mattyasovszky* as the person who committed atrocities against the detainees in *Apátfalva* as well (HU-MNL-CSML-KL NB. 283/1946).

time the court hearing of the smuggling case took place in the *Makó People's Court* in July and August 1946.³⁷ This will be discussed later.

5. FROM CRIME SYNDICATES TO ORDINARY PEOPLE

After the World War, the communist henchmen of the new occupying forces, the Soviets took the places of the previous officials serving the Germans. Much like across the rest of *Europe*, efforts to find suspected war criminals and holding them accountable had begun in *Hungary* as well. The legitimacy and professionalism of these proceedings has been the subject of debate for decades. The *People's Prosecutor's Office of Szeged*, the *People's Court of Szeged* and the press at their heels initially envisioned a single large criminal syndicate behind the smuggling of people at the Romanian border. *Andor Mattyasovszky*, who appeared at several locations, was designated as the chief operator. However, it soon became clear that the stationmaster of *Csanádpalota* had never heard of *Mattyasovszky*, and *Sándor Skultéty* also met him for the first time on 4 July 1944. Before his interrogation, *Ferenc Erdei*, the smuggler from *Kiszombor*, never heard of *Mattyasovszky*, and knew *Péter Szilvási* only by hearsay. After that, one large case turned into three smaller ones: the lawsuits against *Mattyasovszky*, *Bujáki* and *Cs. Endes*.

An investigation was launched against *Mattyasovszky* with the assistance of several authorities. As a result, he was indicted by the *People's Prosecutor's Office of Szeged* for war crimes and crimes against the people. In 1947, the *People's Court of Szeged* sentenced *Mattyasovszky* to 5 years' imprisonment and 10 years' loss of rights, which was upheld by the *National Council of People's Courts (NCPC)* in 1948.³⁸ During the incomprehensible archival arrangements of the party state system, the records of the lawsuits of the *People's Court* NB.1377/1945 were destroyed in *Szeged* in the 1970s. However, the records of the investigation were preserved in the *Historical Archive of State Security Services*.³⁹ With regard to *Mattyasovszky*, from now on I provide references only to the data not obtained from there.

Mattyasovszky was born in *Nagybánya* (present day *Baia Mare*) in 1894, and worked as a teacher and headmaster in *Kiskunmajsa* prior to moving to *Makó*. The abuses he committed there against Jews and communists are also recorded in the documents of the investigation. However, from our point of view, what is important is what he did as the counterintelligence lieutenant of the *Royal Hungarian Army V. Corps*. He took over the head of the *Makó* counterintelligence branch on December 15 1943. He held this post until September 1944, the arrival of the Soviet army. The investigation was launched against him in October 1945. That is when a butcher, *István Kránicz*, who had been serving at a border hunter station in *Kiszombor* since January 1944, testified at the police station in *Kiskunfélegyháza*. He saw *Mattyasovszky* at the station several times, sometimes in civilian clothes and sometimes in uniform, bringing different documents. *Kránicz* had heard that a person calling himself *Péter Hajmási* (sic!) transported

³⁷ HU-MNL-CSML-KL NB. 283/1946.

³⁸ The *National Council of People's Court* (1945–1950) was to conduct the judicial review of the cases of the people's courts after appeals. The sentencing practice of this body was significantly more professional than that of the people's courts.

³⁹ ÁBTL 3.1.9.-V-74048.

Poles and Jews recruited in *Budapest to Kiszombor*.⁴⁰ Before their arrival, he notified the commander of the station, Sergeant Major *Bernát László*, who captured the fugitives with the help of German soldiers. The people were frisked at the station and then taken to the *Szeged* counterintelligence department. *Kránitz* had heard of a Polish count from whom 13 gold coins from the time of *Napoleon* had been taken.⁴¹ During his interrogation, *Mattyasovszky* responded to *Kránitz*'s testimony. According to him, he visited the border hunter station in *Kiszombor* twice. He made no incriminating testimony against *Szilvási*, nor did he know of any German soldiers. Gold coins were indeed taken from the fugitives, but they were sent to *Szeged* alongside the records made of the detention. His testimony was somewhat altered when a month later, on 22 November 1945 he was interrogated in the *Military Policy Department of the Hungarian 5th Military District in Szeged*.⁴² This time he claimed to have visited *Kiszombor* once and *Apátfalva* also once as ordered by his superiors, since in both villages there was a smuggling gang luring wealthy Jews to the border with the promise of taking them to *Romania*. The fugitives were captured by the gendarmes in *Apátfalva* and the border hunters in *Kiszombor*. *Mattyasovszky* interrogated the detainees, but after concluding that they were not spies, he did not even send a report about them to *Szeged*. He denied that he had abused the detainees and that he had demanded *Napoleon* gold coins from them. The next day, on November 23, *Mattyasovszky* was confronted with *Ferenc Bujáki*, the gendarmerie commander in *Apátfalva*. He then amended his testimony again. According to the new version, he visited the gendarmerie station in *Apátfalva* in June 1944 by the order of his superiors. He had to interrogate the Jews captured at the border to find out whether there was an intelligence officer among them. *Bujáki* and a gendarme inspector from *Szeged* were also present. *Mattyasovszky* talked about 5–6 arrested Jews, including a woman and a small child. Their valuables had already been confiscated by the gendarmes. He, however, beat the palms of two men with a baton and demanded the handover of “foreign currency”, but was unsuccessful.

The commander of the gendarme station in *Apátfalva*, *Ferenc Bujáki*, also appeared before the *People's Court* after the World War. During the investigation, the relationship between *Bujáki* and fisherman *János Tóth L* outlined above underwent interesting changes. According to the report of the *Makó Police Station* dated 3 January 1946, *Tóth* testified that *Bujáki* and the *V. Szeged Gendarmerie District* forced him to inform on the fugitives. In the *People's Court* in *Makó* on 13 July 1946, *Bujáki* made a completely different claim: *Tóth* contacted him about finding a package with 57 identification cards and birth certificates at the border. He saw Hungarian writing on these, he did not encounter any Hebrew text. He suspected espionage, so he reported the incident to the gendarme station. Upon orders of his superiors, *Bujáki* then instructed *Tóth* to monitor the fugitives. At the repeated court hearing on 22 August, *Bujáki* maintained his previous statements, and *Tóth* adjusted his own to *Bujáki*'s. Now he was also talking about found identification cards and omitted from his confession the Romanian man shouting from across

⁴⁰ The person is obviously *Péter Szilvási*. It is impossible to find out whether he himself used the pseudonym from the operetta *The Csárdás Princess* or *Kránitz* misunderstood something.

⁴¹ It is not clear whether the figure of the Polish count became a sort of topos or *Kránitz* was talking at this point about the incident in *Csanádpalota*. Though as we saw, in that case *Skultéty* started the legend borrowing the name of a real person, *Bohdan Stypirski*.

⁴² The military districts were secret military investigative bodies, intelligence and counterintelligence secret services created at the behest of the *Provisional National Government*.

the border. He denied his trips to *Budapest*, as well as the fact that he had known *Bujáki* before the incident. When the chief judge confronted him with his own confession of 28 December 1945, which had a completely different content, *Tóth* indicated that it did not correspond to reality. *Bujáki* was eventually sentenced to 5 years in prison by the *People's Court*.⁴³ *Tóth* was a defendant in the trial of *Mattyasovszky* but was acquitted due to lack of evidence.

After being caught in *Csanádpalota*, *Sándor Skultéty* was arrested alongside *Mihály Iván*. In August 1944, they were the first prisoners of the newly inaugurated *Police Headquarters* in *Szeged*. Their case grew into a public scandal. Not because the public was concerned about the fate of those smuggled or because profiting from human lives was morally unacceptable. The scandal was caused by the fact that the illegal acts were committed by well-known public figures. *Iván's* name was removed from the header of the *Szegedi Új Nemzedék* in August 1944, but he was soon released along with *Skultéty*. Neither of them was convicted of smuggling either then or after the war. *Iván* fled from *Szeged*, his further fate remains a matter of speculation. *Skultéty* turned out to be a talkative witness in the cases of both *Mattyasovszky* and *Cs. Endes*, presenting the details of the human smuggling operation he organized several times.

Finally, let us not forget about the stationmaster of *Csanádpalota*, who busted *Skultéty's* operation late on the night of July 3, 1944. *Dániel Cs. Endes* was finally acquitted of the charges against him by the *NCPC* in 1949. His lawyer, *Manó Eisner* drew the attention of the *People's Court* to the fact that his client was a person obliged to perform military service, similarly to many other employees of the railway. Therefore, he owed obedience not only to his civilian superiors but also to the military bodies. He had received a special warning from the military headquarters of the *Szeged* railway station about the possible appearance of suspicious individuals, furthermore, he was afraid that he himself was being monitored. He lifted the receiver of the telephone on July 3 1944 under the pressure of these circumstances. Several residents of *Csanádpalota* spoke on behalf of *Cs. Endes* in front of the *People's Court*, including a district doctor of Jewish origin. His reliability was strengthened by the certificate issued to him by the *Hungarian Communist Party* and the railway union about his services at the *Csorna* railway station in 1945. The *People's Court* finally decided that *Cs. Endes* did not overreach his official authority, he did not report the group of fugitives out of political conviction.

6. CLOSING OVERVIEW

From the sources examined, several, sometimes intertwined threads of events emerge. *Ferenc Erdei* could not be linked to the other cases, and there is no indication that fugitive he ever gave over to the authorities the fugitives that he had taken to the border. *Dániel Cs. Endes* was also not involved in the deception of the fugitives, nor was *Sándor Skultéty*. *Erdei, Iván* and *Skultéty* saw a business in human trafficking but they had no intention of betraying the fugitives. *Cs. Endes* was not even motivated by financial gain. In the case of *Mattyasovszky* it is obvious, with *Bujáki* it is probable that their intentions were to rob the fugitives. By virtue of their official power, they had every opportunity to carry out these intentions. Not to mention that it allowed them to prove their worth to their superiors and the German occupiers. Human smuggling was just one way to do this. Based on several testimonies, they were accused of other criminal acts

⁴³ HU-MNL-CSML-KL NB. 283/1946.

as well, which cannot be outlined at this juncture. Both *Tóth* and *Szilvási* had hoped for huge profits from human trafficking. They were not disappointed. After collecting what was due from the fugitives, they handed the people over to *Mattyasovszky* and *Bujáki* without remorse.

The people presented here did not belong to the same social class. *Mihály Iván* became one of the leading Catholic intellectuals in the city as the editor-in-chief of one of the most read daily newspapers of *Szeged*, although some of his acts were a far cry from that of an intellectual or a Christian. *Sándor Skultéty* was a senior city official, managing the *Tourism Office of Szeged*. They both belonged to the class of urban bourgeoisie. *Andor Mattyasovszky* with his qualifications as a teacher was the embodiment of the small-town intellectual. *Dániel Cs. Endes* had a high school diploma. The others, the farmer *Ferenc Bujáki*, the fisherman *János Tóth L*, the day labourer *Péter Szilvási* and the dentistry trader *Ferenc Erdei*, belonged to the lower social strata with their more modest education. Probably all of them had known deprivation, so they were eager to benefit from the possibility of earning money by smuggling people. In addition, *Tóth* and *Szilvási* acted with official approval or even upon official orders, exercising this form of financial gain without any risks. Unlike *Erdei*, who probably put his own neck on the line because he only cooperated with his contacts in *Romania* and *Budapest*, not with the Hungarian authorities.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this paper only highlights the main events of what transpired. The sources used include many small details, the family background of the actors, and the events of their lives before and after the human smuggling cases. Further analysis of the documents, press reports, and sources not used in the study would hardly yield any significant new information. At the same time, it can contribute to the understanding of personal motivations and micro-level factors.

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