

Conditions in Political Prisons in Hungary.

Respondent's Background.

From 1934 to 1942 I worked with the City of Budapest. From 1942 to 1943 I was in real estate business. In 1944 I served in the Hungarian Army as first lieutenant, from 1945 to 1948 I worked for a lumber company. In November 1945 I was elected to the Hungarian parliament as a representative of the Smallholders Party in the 2nd district of Budapest. Later on I became a vice president of the national committee of the Smallholders Party. In September 1947 I was elected a representative of the Pfeiffer Party when in November of the same year the Party ~~was dissolved~~ of the same year the Party was dissolved I lost my mandate. From 1948 to 1955 I was in prison.

Respondent's Imprisonment.

Throughout the postwar years I had written many weekly reports on the political and economic conditions in Hungary upon the request of the American legation in Budapest. I usually handed over my reports to a person from the legation at a prearranged time and place in the street. We were supposed to meet weekly but frequently it had happened that either I or the other person could not show up for the date. In such cases we were to meet the

following week the same time and the same place.

I record<sup>ed</sup> that in 1948 we missed about two dates. Once I didn't show up and once the person from the legation didn't come. Thus I had 3 reports ~~on~~ me when the political police arrested me on September 21st 1948.

In view of the fact that they had clear cut evidence against me in form of the reports that I intended to submit to the American legation, I was summarily turned over to the Military Tribunal in Budapest. There I was tried on March 29th 1949 and was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment for passing on information to a foreign power concerning the political and economic situation in Hungary. The judgement against me was in pursuance of the 2nd<sup>para</sup> of article 2 of the law number 18 of 1934.

I had a right to appeal against this judgement to the highest tribunal in Budapest. However, upon reflection I decided to waive my right.

First, as a matter of fact, I wanted to appeal. However, when the persecutor who incidentally behaved as a most monstrous man-hunter during the trial, called me in and told me in the kindest manner that "Oh, my dear friend you should really appeal, I am sure you'll get a much lighter sentence from the higher tribunal". Hearing his assurances and seeing his ~~discreet~~<sup>descriptive</sup> manner of talking

I sensed that he was laying a trap for me, and relying on my common sense I told him, " Mr. <sup>no</sup>Persecutor, I have committed the most he<sup>in</sup>reous of all crimes and I feel I r<sub>e</sub>ally deserve to be punished for the rest of my life". ~~Then he told me,~~ Then he told me, " oh, ~~Persecutor,~~ Pastor, it isn't as bad as that. I think you are making a real mistake by not appealing." After his remarks I was quite sure I did the ~~right~~ right thing when I replied that "I will ~~accept~~ in the judgement of the court and will answer for the crime that I have committed." Incidentally, I might add that other fellow convicts who had appealed their life imprisonments were later condemned to death by the ~~highest~~ highest forum.

#### Prison Conditions and Treatment of Political Prisoners.

The worst kind of conditions and treatment existed in the investigating <sup>stage</sup> ~~phase~~ of the proceedings. Political suspects were usually taken to the AVO headquarters ~~and~~ at Andrassy Ut 60. There the name of the investigating officer was kept secret, (this was changed under the Nagy regime), so that at no time would such an officer be identified later for the ~~cr~~uelties and inhuman treatments to which he subjected the prisoners. Also, the investigating place was the worst in <sup>some</sup> ~~times~~ of the ~~daily~~ <sup>daily</sup> food ration which consisted of hot, salty ~~war~~ water, called soup, ~~once~~ once a day, accompanied by a small slice of bread. From 1948 to 1955 I served my term in

various prisons including those at Váz, at the Marke Street and in the Gyujtófogház. In most of these places we received 3 meals a day; black coffee in the morning, soup and dried vegetables for lunch, and dried vegetables for dinner. We also had some meat once or twice a week. Our food both in terms of quality and quantity was the worst from 1949 to 1952. From 1953 to 1955, under Imre Nagy's premiership, there was some improvement but in 1955, after his replacement and Rákosi's return to power, everything retorted back to to the pre-Nagy situation. One of the most dreaded and ~~exhausting~~ <sup>enervating</sup> means of punishment used against political prisoners was the so called "short iron", (Kurtavas). By this punishment your wrists and ankles were put in irons in a most uncomfortable position for a period of 8 hours which could be repeated from 2 to 8 times.

I was out in the short iron a couple of times. At the end of 8 hours my blood circulation in my <sup>legs</sup> ~~hips~~ stopped completely and when they tried to get me up from my sitting position I just collapsed and had to be carried out.

#### Location of Prisons.

Most of the political prisoners were kept in the Gyujtófogház, in Váz, or in Márianosztra, whereas most of the regular criminals served their prison sentences in Szeged in the Csillagbörtön. Women political prisoners

~~Esikszék~~ were kept in Sátorajauhely and in Kalocsa.

Up to 1952 the most dangerous political prisoners were kept in Vaz and the less dangerous ones in the Gyűjtőfogház. After 1952, there was a reversed situation. They transferred the most dangerous ones to the Gyűjtőfogház and ~~the~~ the others to Vaz.

Differences of treatment between political prisoners and regular criminals.

The most dangerous political prisoners were separated in individual cells in the so called "small prison section" of the Gyűjtőfogház. There a deadly silence reigned. You were not allowed to speak aloud to the guard. The reason for this was, that they wanted to prevent your neighbour convict from recognizing your <sup>si</sup> vice. I was kept there 2 or 3 times for a period of 2 to 3 days.

A significant difference between regular criminals and political prisoners was that whereas the former were allowed to file complaints with the party secretary, the latter were not allowed to do so. Still another difference was that whereas the former were allowed to work, in connection with the latter the Party determined whether the prisoner should be allowed to work. Most of us preferred to work because you could go crazy sitting all day in a dark room. The Communists, of course,

insisted that work was an honour though many political prisoners refused to work for the Communist regime. A friend of mine, for instance, said he wouldn't lift his little finger no matter what they did to him. Subsequently ~~he~~<sup>therefore</sup> ~~ever~~, he conditioned himself to sleep all day. I was much more nervous and restless and I felt I had to do something so I signed up for work. Still another reason ~~was~~ for my decision<sup>was</sup> that during the Nagy regime, work had ~~X~~ certain material advantages besides being a sort<sup>of</sup> distraction.

Work conditions.

We worked under the norm system where the minimum amount of daily work in regard to each type of job was precisely set. Those who overfulfilled their norm 150% for over a period of one year could submit a petition for the lowering to half of their prison terms. For a lesser overfulfillment of your norm you could apply for a 1/3, 1/4, 1/6, 1/8 corresponding reduction of your prison term. For a 5% daily overfulfillment of your norm over a period of one month they would automatically ~~deduct~~<sup>deduct</sup> one day from your prison term. However, they would not deduct more than 15 days a month from your term period. Since I was sentenced to life imprisonment, under the law, I was to be released after 19 years or even after 15 years if my behavior in prison proved to be excellent

In my case a few days deduction of course did not count too ~~much~~ much. Never the less I overfulfilled my norm 190%.

Kind of work.

In view of the fact that I know English, German and French very well, I was frequently used as an interpreter mostly in connection with translations. Those of us who knew foreign languages received translation jobs from the AVO, and on many occasions also from outside governmental institutions (meaning institutions not connected with the prison administration or the AVO). Others who had different kinds of technical ~~skills~~ <sup>skills</sup> would be used accordingly as engineers, economists, handicraftsmen, and so on, mostly in connection with the fulfillment of the 5 year plan. This system, of course, represented for the Communist regime an extremely cheap skilled labour force.

If a translation job came up for which ~~some~~ some of us were qualified we would be taken into a specially equipped and separated sector of the Gyűjtőfogház (or ~~the~~ to the Poutca prison, especially in connection with Yugoslav translations). The place at the Gyűjtőfogház was called the "Little Motel", because it had comfortable beds, writing desk and running water in it. There we would work 12 to 16 hours in a fully equipped up to date library where the latest foreign regular and

and technical dictionaries, American and other foreign Encyclopedias could be found, such as for instance the 32 volume Encyclopedia Britannica. Our job was to translate articles and books in the fields of natural sciences, physics, biology, chemistry and especially in the field of atomic energy.

Our work norm was established on the basis of 8, 10, 12, typed pages a day per person in connection with technical, and political texts, and fiction respectively. Each prisoner had a booklet in which the brigade leader would check every day how far he had <sup>progress</sup> proceast with the translation indicating the page numbers and lines. I should add, however, that ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> earlier mentioned norms in connection with translation jobs were not absolute. Frequently an AVO officer would come into the prison with a book under his arm and say, I have a book for you. How long will it take you to translate it? We would take the book look at it, size it up <sup>say, it would</sup> and would ~~take~~ take 3 to 4 weeks if we worked day and night. He would say, "What! 3 to 4 weeks,

and then he would turn to some other prisoners, would yell at them and ask the same question upon which the other scared <sup>invaders</sup> would say "we might be able to do it in 2 to 3 weeks". Then the AVO officer would turn to us with a sneering smile saying "didn't I tell you, you



reactionary saboteurs!"

I recall a very amusing episode, one day we had to translate a French book on atomic energy which was published in the 1940's. It took us about 5 weeks because it was a very difficult technical style. Months went by, if not a year, when an AVO officer came carrying a very important book which turned out to be a quite recent Russian publication on atomic energy. He wanted to have a translation in 2 weeks. Our Russian experts told him that it was impossible to translate a difficult technical language in that short a time. Then one of us who did the translation of the French book and who also knew Russian looked at it and to his great amazement discovered that the so called Russian original work was a word by word translation of the French book that we earlier translated. Nowhere in the Russian book was it indicated that it was a translation of the French book, it appeared as an original work under the name of a Russian. Fortunately, we had kept a copy of the French translation and after we had made sure that there was no mistake about it we told the AVO officer that our group could prepare the translation in less than a week's time, a fact that put us into the grace of the AVO officer.

Improvements under the Nagy regime.

Already in the summer of 1954 I had asked for a reduction of my prison term. In the petition I also stated that I was very repentant for what I had done. Such petitions for reduction of prison terms as well as requests for retrials were allowed under the Nagy regime. The first of such cases was of course the Nagy Rajk case.

Under the Nagy regime the short iron <sup>PUNISHMENT</sup> ~~abolishment~~ was abolished and our food had improved. Another improvement was that the <sup>political</sup> ~~AMERICAN~~ investigators had to introduce themselves to the prisoner and had to sign their names ~~the~~ before the suspects signature. A further improvement after 1953 was that we received some compensation for our work, an amount <sup>from</sup> which the costs of our maintainance were deducted before 1953. We were also supposed to receive compensation for our work, however, in spite of the fact that each month we were told that the respective amounts earned had been added in the books to the previous amounts, at the end we were told that we didn't have a single cent. After 1953 we received pay for the work ordered by outside institutions but not for the work done for the AVO ~~or~~ or the prison administration. To give you an example, those of us who did translations would get 12 forints per each typed page (40 lines on a page) if the translation was for

from a foreign language into Hungarian. If the translation was from Hungarian into a foreign language we would receive 50% more. Thus for a book translation we could get four to 5000 forints. But, of course, our maintenance costs were deducted from this amount on the basis of a set scale. Thus eventually you couldn't get more than about 1/6 of the earned amount. For this money the prisoner could buy whatever food was available in the prison for sale or could pay for his laundry or could send the amount for the support of his family. (At this point the respondent showed the interviewer a postal order for 6 1/2 forints which he had received from the state prison as compensation for his works.)

In April 1955 when the Nagy regime issued an amnesty degree I requested for my release. I wasn't sure whether I would be able to get out in view of the fact that after the downfall of the Nagy regime, the Rakosi clique failed to implement fully the amnesty degree and many of those who had fallen into the categories of the degree were not released. I however was lucky enough to get out.

Respondent's remarks concerning the project.

I think that the project is fine. However, if I may, I would like to suggest that you pay attention to the present political developments in Hungary as well. I had helped in the preparation of the report to the United Nations on Hungary and I very strongly feel that

attention should be focused ~~from~~ the present developments  
<sup>and</sup> persecutions. The Communist regime is ~~a~~ extremely sensitive  
and if ~~x~~ the facts are brought before a world forum they  
might ease the lot of millions