

The Accusation of Dohnányi: The Legal Procedure in Hungary, 1945–1946

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ABSTRACT

Ernő Dohnányi, the world-renowned musician, was almost entirely forgotten during the decades between his emigration in 1944 and the change of political regime in Hungary: his name actually disappeared from public cultural knowledge. Though there may have been several explanations for the ignorance, it is not an exaggeration to state that the main reasons behind the tragic gap in his posthumous reception are of a political nature. It is widely known nowadays that during the settlements after World War II, Dohnányi – in his absence – was charged with intellectual collaboration with the Hungarian far right-wing regime. According to the present state of research, the charges were finally withdrawn as they were mostly ungrounded. Yet, the formerly adored artist and central personality in cultural life had become *persona non grata* for more than 40 years. After the political changes, his oeuvre seemed to be rehabilitated but without a thorough investigation of the charges and their background. This is why political prejudices are currently experienced simultaneously with a total bagatellization of the possible mistakes in his interwar activity. Thus, a systematic research into this subject has become very urgent. This study, which is intended to be a chapter of a full-length monograph on Dohnányi and politics (expected in 2023/24), was founded by the János Bolyai Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and is one of the very first publications of this project in English. It aims to give a thorough description of the first two years of the official proceeding against Dohnányi at the different investigative levels such as the justificatory committees, public prosecutor, and government ministry.

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KEYWORDS

Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi, political accusations, prosecution of war criminals, World War II

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace in Hungarian music history that Ernő Dohnányi, who played a central role in Hungarian music life as an administrative leader and a versatile musician in the interwar period, practically disappeared from Hungarian cultural memory after his emigration (November 1944) during the decades until the change of political regimes in the late 1990s. Although there were attempts at his rehabilitation (such as the biography by Bálint Vázsonyi published in 1971¹ or a centenary exhibition at the National Széchényi Library organized by István Kecskeméti), they did not bring about significant changes. The turning point came in the 2000s with a revived interest in Dohnányi's oeuvre appearing simultaneously in Hungary and in the United States: in addition to several important new publications and an increasing number of sound recordings and concert performances, even an independent research place was established in the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.² There might have been several interconnected reasons why Dohnányi was ignored, but there can be no doubt that political factors played the most significant part: notably, during the post-war indictments, in his absence, he was accused of intellectual collaboration with the far-right regime. Although he was, as far as we know, acquitted in 1949, the alleged charges and the rumours they led to still have an impact in the perception of the oeuvre even today.

Alleged charges – Dohnányi's political case has not been the subject of systematic research up to now, so the exact reasons for his conviction were unknown. While Vázsonyi discusses the issue in detail in his previously mentioned monography, his approach is extremely biased.³ Around the turn of the millennium, János Breuer devoted a couple of articles to the subject, which, similarly to Vázsonyi's book, are rather one-sided and lacking in thorough research into the sources.⁴ At the beginning of the 2010s, James A. Grymes devoted two prudent and balanced articles to the political charges, in which he relied primarily on the documentary material – letters, official documents, press clippings – found in Dohnányi's own collection (then in Tallahassee, Florida, now in Budapest at the Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities).⁵ And although these studies, despite their several antecedents, must be regarded as

¹Bálint VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1/1971).

²On the history of the Dohnányi research and on the literature published in the 2000s, see the introduction in Veronika KUSZ, *A Wayfaring Stranger. Ernst von Dohnányi's American Years* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), xv–xix.

³In the second, unchanged edition: Bálint VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő* (Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2/2002), 271–288.

⁴See mainly: János BREUER, “Töredékek Dohnányiról III. A Zenei Kamara körül” [Fragments on Dohnányi III. Around the Musical Chamber], *Muzsika* 41/11 (November 1998), 19–21, and “Dohnányi meghurcoltatása” [The persecution of Dohnányi], in *Dohnányi Évkönyv 2002* [Dohnányi Yearbook 2002], ed. by Márta Sz. FARKAS (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2002), 67–76.

⁵James A. GRYMES, “Dohnányi Was Not – And Could Not Have Possibly Been – A War Criminal: The Hungarian Defense of Ernő Dohnányi, 1945–1949,” *Studia Musicologica* 54/3 (September 2013), 301–317, and “Ernst von Dohnányi and Communist Hungary in the Early Cold War,” *Acta Musicologica* 84/1 (2012), 65–86.



the first actual scholarly investigations of the topic, its arguments and sources have not sufficiently come to the attention of the public.

As a result, interestingly, today we can see the prejudices that still overshadow Dohnányi's person and work in parallel with simplistic statements that still keep appearing, such as “Ernő Dohnányi was innocently declared as a war criminal”⁶ and “His career was destroyed by slander.”⁷ In my research, supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, I have set out not only to investigate in a scholarly way the “Dohnányi-affair” but to examine his earlier musical activities which could be also interpreted as a political pretext leading to the accusations that can give a much wider context of the case. Taking an attitude very different from that of the former literature on the subject, I intend to clearly separate the different types of sources, or the meanings and lessons of the different types of sources (i.e. the official documents from the press articles, for example) as they should not be taken as equally authentic testimonies of this delicate matter. This study is the first account of the research in English and a summary of the first two years of the official proceedings and their legal background against Dohnányi.

2. “THE FIRST LIST OF WAR CRIMINALS”

The first international conventions on the necessity and the principles of the punishment of those responsible were already drawn up in 1942–43, long before the end of World War II.⁸ Later, the Yalta Conference (February 4–11, 1945), the London Agreement in August 1945 “for the prosecution and punishment of the major war criminals of the European Axis,”⁹ and afterwards the Armistice Agreement signed by the Allied Powers and Hungary on January 20,

⁶The article published without an author is entitled *Múlt-kor* (July 27, 2020) <mult-kor.hu/artatlanul-minositettekhaborus-bunsnek-dohnanyi-ernot-20200727> (last accessed: January 26, 2022).

⁷The title of Judit CSERVENKA's review: *Felvidék.ma* (December 8, 2017) <felvidek.ma/2017/12/ragalom-tortemeg-palyajat> (last accessed: January 26, 2022).

⁸See for example the London Agreement (January 13, 1942), and the Moscow Declaration of the Allied Powers (October 30, 1943). In my research the following sources were used regarding the punishment of war criminals, the establishment of People's Courts and the history of the decrees and laws which made it possible: Tibor LUKÁCS, *A magyar népbíróági jog és a népbíróágok (1945–1950)* [Hungarian people's tribunal law and the people's courts 1945–1950] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó – Zrínyi Kiadó, 1979); Tibor ZINNER, “[...] ‘éjjel-nappal jó hangulatban dolgozunk és igyekszünk igazolni a belénk vetett reményeket’. Szembenézés – a népbíróágokról feketén-fehéren” [...we are working day and night in a good mood and trying to meet the expectations and hopes towards us.” Facing each other – in people's courts in black and white], in *Hóman Bálint és népbíróági pere* [Bálint Hóman and his people's court trial], ed. by Gábor UJVÁRY (Budapest – Székesfehérvár: Ráció Kiadó – Városi Levéltár és Kutatóintézet, 2019), 115–162; Gábor UJVÁRY, “Hóman Bálint 1946-os népbíróági pere és annak 2015-ös újratárgyalása” [Bálint Hóman's people's court trial of 1946 and rehearing in 2015], in *Hóman Bálint és népbíróági pere* [Bálint Hóman and his people's court trial], 163–195; Mihály SOÓS, “A háborús és népellenes bűntettek feltárásainak forrásai a történeti levéltárban” [Sources for investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity in the historical archives], a publication available online on the website of the Historical Archives of State Security Organizations [“published: Trezor 3. 81–106”], <https://www.abtl.hu/iratok/cikkek/soos_haborus> (last visited: January 26, 2022).

⁹“London agreement of August 8, 1945 ... for the Prosecution and Punishment of the MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS of the EUROPEAN AXIS.” Full text, see, for example: <http://www.icls.de/dokumente/imt_london_agreement.pdf> (last accessed: January 26, 2022).



1945 in Moscow confirmed the previously established objectives. The latter agreement included the following: “Hungary will cooperate in the apprehension and trial, as well as the extradition to the governments concerned, of persons accused of war crimes.”¹⁰ The Debrecen Provisional Hungarian Government headed by Colonel-General Béla Dálnoki Miklós (December 22, 1944 – November 15, 1945), aiming to lead the country out of the fascist coalition by signing an armistice with the Allies, declared to begin the prosecution process on the day it was established and started preparing it.¹¹ The Premier’s Decree 81/1945 on People’s Judiciary was finally issued on January 25, based on the Moscow Declaration.¹² The decree provides for the implementation of people’s justice until the restoration of the court of jurors, and according to its preamble it is “[...] driven by the need to ensure that all those who caused or were responsible for the historic disaster of the Hungarian people should be punished accordingly as soon as possible.”¹³ The decree came into force on February 5 (enacted into law on September 16 as Act VII of 1945),¹⁴ but it is a good illustration of the social tension urging for proceedings and punishment that the first People’s Court trial initiated by the authority of the Budapest National Committee established to reorganize local governments and public administration had already started on January 29 and the first two convicts had been executed on February 4, i.e. before the decree came into force.¹⁵

Section 11 of Prime Minister’s Decree 81/1945 divides war criminals into five categories, which are then further amended in Section 13. Here is a summary of the sections.

Any person is guilty of a war crime who: 1. by their activities or conduct in a leading position contributed to the extension of the 1939 war to Hungary or Hungary’s increasing involvement in the

¹⁰“Decree 525/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Proclamation of the Armistice Agreement.” Full text, see: *Magyarországi Rendeletek Tára* [Collection of Hungarian Decrees] 1945. 79. I–VI. (Budapest: Magyar Belügyminisztérium / Szikra Nyomda, 1946), 45. [Hereinafter: Collection of Decrees 1945.]

¹¹“The democratic transformation of Hungary is a necessary precondition for the restoration of the victory of the Hungarian war of independence, of our independence and our statehood. Accordingly, the Provisional National Government will repeal all anti-people laws and decrees along with the barbarous regulations against the Jews. It will guarantee democratic freedoms: freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and association, universal and equal suffrage by secret vote and freedom of religion. The Provisional National Government will dissolve all Arrow Cross and other anti-people organizations. It will eliminate the Nazi racial and national hatred from public life, culture and schools. It will purge the state authorities from Arrow Cross and other German hirelings and will punish traitors. It will build a public administration based on democracy and restore local councils to municipalities, towns and counties.” (Translated from Hungarian.) László SZÜCS (ed.), *Dálnoki Miklós Béla kormányának (Ideiglenes Nemzeti Kormány) Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvei 1944. december 23. – 1945. november 15.* [The minutes of the Council of Ministers of Miklós Béla Dálnoki’s government, Provisional National Government, December 23, 1944 – November 15, 1945] (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1997), 25. [Hereinafter: SZÜCS (ed.), The Minutes of the Council of Ministers.]

¹²“Decree 81/1945 of the Provisional National Government on People’s Courts,” in Collection of Decrees 1945, 17–24.

¹³*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴An important amendment to the decree was made on April 27, 1945: “Decree 1440/1945 on the Amendment and Addition to Decree 81/1945 on people’s courts,” in Collection of Decrees 1945, 121–125.

¹⁵On the trial of Péter Rotyits and Sándor Szívós and on the legality of the verdict, see for example Attila PAPP, “Néptörvényszék, Népbírószág és népbíróági jog Magyarországon” [People’s tribunal, people’s court and people’s tribunal law in Hungary], online publication on the website of Széchenyi University: *e-tudomány* (2011/4), <http://www.sze.hu/~kallay/letolt/2011/februar/Papp_Attila_Nptrvnyzsk_Npbrsg_s_npbrsgi_jog_Magyarorszon.pdf>, 20–33. (last visited: January 26, 2022).



war or did not attempt to prevent it, ... ; 2. as a member of the government, parliament or as a civil servant in a leading position initiated or, in spite of foreseeing the consequences, participated in making decisions bringing the country into the world war breaking out in 1939; 3. attempted to prevent the armistice by force or through their influence; 4. with their leading actions assisted the Arrow Cross [the Hungarian fascist party, later government] in its rebellion to seize power and in its retaining power ... ; 5. ... was generally an instigator, perpetrator or participant in the unlawful execution and torture of people, [Section 13] ... in addition, any person is guilty of a war crime who 1. in printed publications (in any other forms of reproduction), in public speeches or on the radio incited to continue and strengthen war activities. ... ; 6. had considerable intellectual contribution to the war propaganda.¹⁶

Based on these definitions, the Provisional National Government drew up the first list of war criminals as early as February 9, 1945,¹⁷ which was published on February 16 in the document entitled “Statement 1 on war criminals on Section 14 of the armistice agreement.”¹⁸ László Szűcs, editor of the document, remarks that the list was sent to Major General Belyanov, the administrative leader of the Soviet delegation on the Allied Control Council in Hungary with a cover letter of March 3, and later (along with another list) to the British delegation in Hungary with a cover letter of May 14.¹⁹ The first official list of Hungarian war criminals – soon to be supplemented with a second one – was finally published in the press in May 1945. As *Magyar Nemzet*, the daily paper that had been newly relaunched after a year’s pause enforced by the war, put it:

... the government decree defines who must be considered as war criminals and provides that such traitors shall be punished for their outrageous crimes. Competent authorities have begun without delay to compile a list of war criminals and the work is still in progress. Unfortunately, there are so many Nazi-hirelings, treasonous Arrow Cross followers and immoral inciters that the list of names keeps growing during the work, so several name lists are being compiled. The first list has now been fully compiled. We can publish it in full.²⁰

The first list – both in the Minister Council document and in the press – gives the names in five categories based on a certain combination of the categories described in Sections 11 and 13 of Decree 81/1945. Accordingly, any person is guilty of a war crime who

[1.] ... in a leading position contributed to the extension of the 1939 war to Hungary or Hungary’s increasing involvement in the war or did not attempt to prevent it ... [2.] with their leading actions assisted the Arrow Cross in its rebellion to seize power and in its retaining power ... [3.] took part in the [Arrow Cross leader] Szálasi-treason ... [4.] assisting the Arrow Cross movement as it carried

¹⁶“Decree 81/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the People’s Court,” in Collection of Decrees 1945, 19.

¹⁷See: SZÜCS (ed.), The Minutes of the Council of Ministers, 197.

¹⁸The document was preserved among the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Statement 1 On war criminals for Section 14 of the armistice agreement. Appendix 10/d (to section 10/25), 271ME/1945.” See: SZÜCS (ed.), The Minutes of the Council of Ministers, 203–204.

¹⁹See: SZÜCS (ed.), The Minutes of the Council of Ministers, 204.

²⁰[N. N.], “Itt a magyar háborús bűnösök első hivatalos névjegyzéke” [The first list of Hungarian war criminals has been issued], *Magyar Nemzet* 1/2 (May 3, 1945), 4. The second list was published the following day: See, for example: N. N., “Politikusok, katonatisztek, színészek, újságírók a magyar háborús bűnösök második hivatalos listáján” [Politicians, army officers, actors and journalists on the second official war criminal list], *Magyar Nemzet* 1/3 (May 4, 1945), 3.



out intellectual activities to promote the continuation of the war and the strengthening of war activities ... [5.] abused the power assigned to them by torturing the population of the occupied territories or instigated, committed or participated in the unlawful execution and torture of people.²¹

The list enumerates a total of 106 persons (108 persons in the version sent to the British); 13–12–44–31–6 persons by the different categories. It includes Prime Minister László Bárdossy (in office from April 3, 1941 to March 7, 1942) as the leader of the occupation of Délvidék (a region of former Hungary in the south) and the proponent of the anti-Jewish laws, Prime Minister Béla Imrédy (in office from May 14, 1938 to February 16, 1939), one of the initiators of anti-Semitic politics and also a proponent of the anti-Jewish laws; Prime Minister Döme Sztójay (in office from March 29, 1944 to August 29) as the person responsible for deportations outside Budapest and also Ferenc Szálasi, the Arrow Cross (fascist) head of state of Hungary for the final half year of the country's participation in World War II.

In addition to the most significant persons, most of whom were sentenced to execution, the names of less central figures appeared on the list. In category 4, for instance, there is Ferenc Fiala (1904–1988), the press affairs coordinator and later the press chief of the Arrow Cross Party, Ferenc Kiss (1893–1978), the president of the Chamber of Theater and Film Arts established on the basis of the second anti-Jewish law and the director of the National Theater appointed by Szálasi, or István Mlotay (1883–1963), a far-right journalist and politician. In category 4, Ernő Dohnányi's name also appears on the first list of Hungarian war criminals.

Before discussing the consequences, though, it should be pointed out that Dohnányi only learnt about all this several months later, as he had left Hungary on November 24, 1944 in the company of his partner Ilona Zachár and her family. They stopped first in Vienna and then, in April 1945, they fled from the siege of Vienna to the Austrian Alps and stayed there until the end of 1947 (apart from a few concerts in Austria and Great Britain).²² According to family correspondence, they first received news from home in mid-November 1945. "Your news is not very bright" – Dohnányi reacts to his sister's account. Although the letter from Budapest has not survived, the reply indicates that Mária Dohnányi must have written about the political situation, too.²³ Yet, even after that, the composer was far from well-informed: "my war case just won't settle [...] I don't know what I'm accused of" – he wrote even several months later.²⁴ What I summarize in this study on the chronology of the charges against him and the official position appearing towards him all occurred in his absence and without his knowledge. This is what justifies the way I discuss the issue: this study focuses only on the accusations and not their legitimacy or their direct impact on Dohnányi's life. What he could have known of the proceedings against him or how much he could have perceived of the anger toward him, how all the

²¹See: SZÜCS (ed.), *The Minutes of the Council of Ministers*, 203–204.

²²They already spent Christmas on the French Riviera waiting for their ship to South America – they left Europe for Argentina in April 1948 and finally settled down in the United States in October 1949. Dohnányi never returned to his home country.

²³Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Mária Dohnányi, November 12, 1945. Éva KELEMEN (ed.), *Dohnányi Ernő családi levelei* [Ernő Dohnányi's family correspondence] (Budapest: Gondolat – Országos Széchényi Könyvtár – MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2010), 167–170. [Hereinafter: KELEMEN (ed.), *Family correspondence*.]

²⁴Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Mária Dohnányi, February 20, 1946. KELEMEN (ed.), *Family correspondence*, 173.



events in Hungary influenced his career and how he felt about all this will be discussed in the studies to be completed at a later stage of my research.

3. IN FRONT OF CERTIFICATION COMMITTEES (1945)

“It will probably never be known who came up with the absurd suggestion [i.e. including Dohnányi in the list of war criminals]” – complains János Breuer in his study with the title revealing a lot about his perspective “The persecution of Dohnányi.”²⁵ But is this really the most important question in the issue? After all, when the removal of a couple of names from the list came up in a cabinet meeting in June 1945, the Minister of Justice said, according to the records of the minutes, that he did not consider the list of war criminals as sufficiently accurate because it was “drawn up by means of simple declarations at that time.”²⁶ It can therefore be assumed that there had been no thorough investigation into the actions of the accused – given the shortage of time. Indeed, no investigation at all was necessary for Ernő Dohnányi to come to the government’s attention, since he was the director general of the Liszt Academy of Music until 1943 (and then its honorary director), the president-conductor of the leading state orchestra, the Budapest Philharmonic Society until its dissolution in 1944, and active as the musical director of Hungarian Radio probably even in the second half of 1944. Also, he was a major figure in concert life until the German occupation. It seems that certain sections of the decree quoted above were very well applicable to him: not primarily because of his – supposedly – ideological intellectual activity, but because of his multiple leading positions in public service and his upper house membership, which was automatic with his Liszt Academy general director post. It is not surprising, therefore, that Dohnányi’s name ended up on the list. Furthermore, it is conceivable, though, that someone may have explicitly urged his accusation perhaps even by reaching out to certain government members, which will most probably never be supported by written documentation. But it is of no particular significance, as the “affair” made quite a lot of waves afterwards, which obviously means that it must have reflected the views of several individuals.

Breuer is looking for personal responsibility because he is ignoring the minutes of the Ministers’ Council; he takes it for granted that the accusations started out from the certification committee of the Liszt Academy,²⁷ some members of which, as Dohnányi’s personal acquaintances, could have been his personal adversaries or even enemies. Inferring from this false premise, he also concludes that the article published on May 7 in the paper *A Reggel* “clearly links Dohnányi’s declaration as a war criminal to the certification process,”²⁸ which is a complete misinterpretation of the text. The subtitle of the article is indeed “Certification proceedings have started among musicians, too” but the opening sentence, which reads “it was no surprise to

²⁵BREUER, “Dohnányi meghurcoltatása” [The persecution of Dohnányi], 67.

²⁶See: SZŰCS (ed.), *The Minutes of the Council of Ministers*, 513.

²⁷BREUER, “Dohnányi meghurcoltatása,” 68.

²⁸*Ibid.*



the knowledgeable few that Ernő Dohnányi, the former director general of the Liszt Academy, famous composer and pianist, was placed on the list of war criminals,”²⁹ simply refers to the list published in the press a couple of days before and not to the other battles behind the scenes. All the same, it is still possible and even probable that certain games of power and interests did play an important part in Dohnányi’s certification process, but Breuer shifts the focus of the investigation: instead of analysing the circumstances of and the possible reasons for the accusations, he interprets the case as a showcase trial triggered by personal revenge.³⁰ He proposes his thesis in the introduction to the study, and he sticks to it to the very end:

The minute-and-half-long news report [i.e. on Szálasi’s “cultural conference” held in November 1944; see below], soon became a classical showcase trial. It is unprecedented, and I mean literally unprecedented in Hungary, that anyone except for Dohnányi would have been declared a war criminal on the basis of just this much evidence, completely ignoring the documents proving his innocence which were publicly known in the spring of 1945.

This approach is problematic not only because Dohnányi’s being “not guilty of war crime” could not have been “obviously well-known” in the spring of 1945 or even in 2022, or that Breuer uses his imagination to make up for missing sources which he could have easily accessed, but that he ignores a number of elements of the case which really need to be explained. For instance, why should a person considered a war criminal by the government be subject to a certification committee procedure at all, and why is the case not automatically brought to the higher level of judicature, the People’s Prosecutor’s Office?

Because Ernő Dohnányi’s activities were indeed investigated by at least two separate certification committees: one at the Liszt Academy and another at Hungarian Radio (the documentary evidence of that of the Philharmonic Society is still missing). The Provisional National Government issued Decree 1080/1945 on April 19, 1945, which ordered that:

all civil servants in actual service or recalled from retirement to perform actual service must be subject to a certification procedure ... in order to determine whether their conduct has been prejudicial to the interests of the Hungarian people.³¹

A few days earlier the press reported the opening of the certification procedures: *Szabad Nép*, for example, reported on April 14 that more than ninety teachers and employees would be subject to the procedure at the Liszt Academy.³² The journalists remark suggestively: “Among those to be certified we can see Ernő Dohnányi and Lajos Rajter.”³³ Finally, the decision of the

²⁹N.N., “Miért háborús bűnös az elmenekült Dohnányi Ernő? Megkezdődtek az igazoltatások zenész-fronton is” [Why is Ernő Dohnányi, who fled from Hungary, a war criminal? Certification procedures have started in musical circles], *A Reggel* 19/5 (May 7, 1945), 5.

³⁰Breuer’s interpretation certainly follows that of Vázsonyi, but his seemingly scholarly argumentation makes the impression that he investigated the matter more thoroughly than Vázsonyi.

³¹“Decree 1080/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Public Servants,” in Collection of Decrees 1945, 104.

³²N.N., “A Zeneművészeti Főiskolának...” [The Liszt Academy...] [short news], *Szabad Nép* 3/17 (April 14, 1945), 4.

³³Lajos Rajter (1906–2000) Hungarian (Hungarian minority in Slovakia) conductor, before 1945 a colleague of Dohnányi’s both at the Academy and on Hungarian Radio, who was often highlighted by the media as a far-right musician.



committee meeting was issued on October 17: based on article 4, paragraph 2, section 20 of Decree 1080/1945³⁴ and section 3 of Decree 3300/1945³⁵ the certification committee of the Liszt Academy deprived Dohnányi of the director general position and declared that the documents would be forwarded to the People's Prosecution Office of Budapest³⁶ to "investigate the apparent crime."³⁷ It is clear from the cited sections that the decision was primarily the result of the fact that Dohnányi "had left the country for Germany [sic] without any personal emergency or compulsion directed against him"³⁸ – this is what section 3 of Decree 3300 is about.³⁹ The wording of the decision corresponds to the wording of the decree without giving additional information.

This is also true of a section in the explanation, which repeats, in accordance with the wording of the law, that Dohnányi "supported the Fascist parties, approved of their objectives and conducted propaganda for the Axis Powers and against the Allied Powers."⁴⁰ The initial statement is similarly elusive: "he was a publicly-known pro-German Fascist sympathizer maintaining contacts with right-wing musical circles."⁴¹ This claim is illustrated with the

³⁴"The certification committee may take the following decisions with regard to civil servants subject to the certification procedure: 1. declare them certified; 2. retain them in public service a) reprimand them, b) order their transfer, c) exclude them from promotional opportunities for a certain period (up to five years) d) declare them unsuitable for leading positions; 3. order their retirement; 4. dismiss them from their positions." "Decree 1080/1945 of the Provisional National Government," in Collection of Decrees 1945, 107.

³⁵"Decree 3300/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Civil Servants Who Have Left Their Positions," in Collection of Decrees 1945, 170–171.

³⁶"Number 14/1945 From the Certification Committee of the Liszt Academy of Music. Subject: [Dohnányi's dismissal]" (translated from Hungarian), in Ágnes GÁDOR and Gábor SZIRÁNYI, "Dohnányi Ernő iratok a Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem levéltárában. III. rész: 1941. július – 1949. július" [Dohnányi-documents in the Archives of the Liszt Academy of Music. Part III: July 1941–July 1949], in *Dohnányi Évkönyv 2005* [Dohnányi Yearbook 2005], ed. by Márta Sz. FARKAS and László GOMBOS (Budapest: MTA Zeneudományi Intézet, 2006), 420–421. [Hereinafter: GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification"]

³⁷"Decree 3300/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Civil Servants Who Have Left their Positions," in Collection of Decrees 1945, 170–171.

³⁸GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 421.

³⁹"... civil servants, who, after October 15, 1944, left the territory of Hungary voluntarily or under orders but without any personal compulsion or emergency for Germany or other countries under German occupation ... shall be deprived of their positions." Decree 3300/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Civil Servants Who Have Left Their Positions," in Collection of Decrees 1945, 170–171. It is also true that in the explanatory section, the Liszt Academy document adds that due to his general conduct Dohnányi was "unsuitable for being a civil servant in the people's democracy, which is why the committee would deprive him of his position." GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 420.

⁴⁰GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 421. See the wording of the decree: "It shall be considered as an act particularly prejudicial to the interests of the Hungarian people if the civil servant was a member of a Fascist party (a movement), or supported a party (a movement) of this kind, or approved of their objectives and operations, or when they conducted propaganda for entering the war, continuing the participation in the war or for interests of the Axis Powers or against the interests of the Allied Powers" Decree 1080/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Civil Servants," in Collection of Decrees 1945, 104.

⁴¹GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 421.



following two points, which are examples of the few specific references to Dohnányi's actions included in the document:

His Fascist⁴² sentiments are reflected by the fact that in 1938 he was conducting the orchestra of the Turul Association, which was declared Fascist by the Provisional National Government's Decree 525/1945 and the radio orchestra including the Arrow Cross Imre Stefániai.⁴³

In addition to the above claim, the only concrete accusation is mentioned in the closing paragraph of the explanation:

Ernő Dohnányi was one of the directors of Szálasi's cultural afternoon held in the Buda Castle, together with Zoltán Sámly and Kálmán Hubay, to which all leaders of the right-wing intellectual life were invited, and which the Arrow Cross considered as a cultural demonstration. Nation leader Ferenc Szálasi gave a speech at the event and the celebrations were broadcast on the radio and a film newsreel footage was made. The committee concluded that the list of the invited musicians was compiled by Ernő Dohnányi.⁴⁴

Although the accusations against Dohnányi – those contained in official documents and those published in the press – will be evaluated and their truthfulness will be assessed at a later point in the research in a future publication, it must be pointed out that Dohnányi did indeed participate in the aforementioned event on November 18, 1944, but no documents support the claim that he was the director of the event or compiled the list of invited guests.

Meanwhile, the certification committee of Hungarian Radio drew up the minutes of the meeting and made a decision on July 31.⁴⁵ Similarly to the decision at the Liszt Academy, he was dismissed from his position there, too, but only on the basis of paragraph 2, Section 20 of Decree 1080/1945 which gives the certification committee this right. (True, it also mentioned that he had left for Austria in December 1944, which corresponds to section 3 of the above cited Decree 3300/1945.) The justification of the decision is much shorter but perhaps more tangible than the charges stated by the Liszt Academy's committee: "As he was the director of the musical program of the [Hungarian] Radio, he was responsible for the fact that only German music was played on the radio in the last couple of years."

4. AT THE PEOPLE'S PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE (1946)

According to the last paragraph of Section 20 of Decree 1080/1945, if "the committee finds strong grounds for suspicion that the civil servant subject to the certification procedure has committed a crime, ... all documents along with a copy of the decision shall be forwarded

⁴²Contemporary documents – official documents and press materials alike – mostly used the terms Fascist / National Socialist / Nazi / Arrow Cross interchangeably without identifying any differences among them.

⁴³GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 421.

⁴⁴Ibid., 422.

⁴⁵In a file with the title "The minutes of the meeting / Jenő Bóday". "[The names of the accused:] Ernő Dohnányi / [The subject of the case:] extradition" (Budapest City Archives, HU_BFL_XVII_1518_1945_igazolasiugy_Zenemuveszeti_Foiskola_Dohnanyi).



immediately to the People's Prosecutor's Office."⁴⁶ The certification committee of the Liszt Academy remarked in their decision that they would be forwarding the materials in accordance with the law and also added that "all the more so because Ernő Dohnányi is known to the committee to be on the list of war criminals." Apparently, in the documents dated October 17, the members of the committee must be referring to the lists published in the May papers. However, the case took an unexpected turn at the end of 1945. Rudolf Frankovszky, Dohnányi's new acquaintance in Austria, who was helping refugees with administration, was probably one of the first people who were informed about the turn. As it must have been around this time that Dohnányi learnt about his case back in Hungary, he asked the Hungarian authorities, through Frankovszky, to certify the status of his case.⁴⁷ The reply, a document dated December 14, 1945, i.e. a little more than ten months after the first list had been drawn up, is worth quoting in full:

Hungarian Royal Minister of Justice / No 32.951, 1945. I. M. X.

Subject: certification of dr. Ernő Dohnányi.

At your request, I hereby certify that dr. Ernő Dohnányi was not included in the draft list of war criminals by the interparty committee meeting held for this purpose and that his name was removed from the previously published unauthorised list.

Budapest, December 14, 1945

Ordered by the minister: dr Benkő signed by his own hand

Certification of the document: Péter Bánfalvi, director⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the interparty meeting that was referred to in the document has not yet been exactly identified. Although such meetings were an important forum for the coalition parties' discussions at the time, the publication of the meeting notes indicates that some of the documents have been lost because no official minutes were taken of the meetings.⁴⁹

However it happened, the information was more or less publicly known. This is also indicated by Pál Járdányi's extensive newspaper article which appeared on January 20, 1946, which refers to it as something self-evident: "We agree with those who have removed Ernő Dohnányi from the list of war criminals. He was indeed neither Fascist nor pro-German."⁵⁰ Járdányi's article, which is the most nuanced and least offensive writing among the relevant press material,

⁴⁶"Decree 1080/1945 of the Provisional National Government on the Certification of Civil Servants," 108.

⁴⁷Breuer assumes that Frankovszky – and with him also Dohnányi – might have suspected or even known that his name was no longer on the government's list, and this is why they asked for official confirmation of the fact. BREUER, "Dohnányi meghurcoltatása," 69.

⁴⁸The negative copy of the original document is held in several copies in Dohnányi's bequest: Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities, Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Dohnányi Collection, "Political Documents" file, MZA-DE-Ta-Script 5.025/48:1–2.

A negative copy of the original document is held in several copies in ELKH BTK Institute of Musicology, 20–21.

⁴⁹Julianna HORVÁTH, Éva SZABÓ, László SZÜCS and Katalin ZALAI, *Pártközi értekezletek. Politikai érdekegyeztetés, politikai konfrontáció* [Inter-party negotiations, political confrontation], 1944–1948 (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2003).

⁵⁰Pál JÁRDÁNYI, "Dohnányi Ernőről, *Szabad Szó*, 1946. január 20." [On Ernő Dohnányi, *Szabad Szó*, 20 January 1946], in *Járdányi Pál összegyűjtött írásai* [Collected writings of Pál Járdányi], ed. by Melinda BERLÁSZ (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2000), 349.



is in itself a revealing document in the chronology of the events, because this 26-year-old composer, a devoted Kodály-pupil, contradicts the position of the decision of the Liszt Academy's certification committee in several other points, even though the decision had been finalized a couple of months before and actually signed also by Járdányi himself as a member of the committee.

Regardless of the existence of the rather precarious exemption document, the certification committee's documents did get forwarded to the People's Prosecutor's Office, and according to a thin folder with the title "Ernő Dohnányi / extradition" including documents from the People's Court of Budapest preserved in the Budapest City Archives, the case was discussed in the fall of 1946 – I will mainly take these documents as a starting point in the following part of the paper.⁵¹ The documents testify that Dohnányi's activities in Hungarian Radio were not so much in focus. It is true that the final report of November 28 states that "witnesses reported that the suspect made music into politics and did not play Jewish composers' works on the radio,"⁵² but no further investigation was undertaken in this direction at the time. The two witnesses recorded in the minutes were the Schoenbergian composer Sándor Jemnitz and the excellent violinist Ede Zathureczky representing the Liszt Academy (as a member of the certification committee of the Academy and director general, respectively) and Zathureczky made the following evasive statements about the Radio:

I cannot give you an authentic opinion on his actions in the Radio because I have only been able to observe it as anyone else could by following the radio program in the newspapers. It was, however, common knowledge that the radio had not been playing Jewish composers' works for a while: to what extent this was Dohnányi's doing or was the result of other forces, I do not know.⁵³

As a matter of fact, Zathureczky was not only Dohnányi's successor as academy director, but also an old chamber music partner and – we can say – a friend. He must have been well acquainted with Dohnányi's activities and thinking in the most critical years. It was perhaps the result of his own delicate position that he expressed himself so cautiously in his witness statement. Although he did mention the facts, notably that Dohnányi attended Szálasi's cultural reception (together with Zathureczky, by the way⁵⁴) and left the country for Western Europe in November 1944, all this did not change his position that any mistakes Dohnányi might have made resulted from certain personality traits, which in peacetime could even be called fortunate. As Zathureczky puts it:

⁵¹ Folder with the title "The names of the accused: Ernő Dohnányi / The subject of the case: Extradition" (translated from Hungarian) (Budapest City Archives, HU_BFL_XVII_1518_1945_igazolasiugy_Zenemuveszeti_Foiskola_Dohnanyi). [Hereinafter: BFL XVII.1518.]

⁵² "Report / László Sárközi second lieutenant" (translated from Hungarian), November 28, 1946. Further signatures: Lajos Keresztes (first lieutenant, head of department), Miklós Ákos (captain, chief head of department). BFL XVII.1518.

⁵³ "Witness statement / Ede Zathureczky, László Sárközi" (translated from Hungarian), November 1946. BFL XVII.1518.

⁵⁴ "In November, Ferenc Szálasi convened a 'cultural conference.' Whoever is still alive and can be counted among the ruins of Hungarian cultural life receives an invitation. Among them Dohnányi, of course. His first impulse is not to attend. Then the telephone rings twice. First, the director general of the Liszt Academy enquires whether Dohnányi intends to accept the invitation. Hearing his reply, he points out how important it is for both of them to find out what the new regime is planning." (Translated from Hungarian.) VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő*, 260–261.



To the best of my knowledge, he had been known in the musical community as a liberal thinker for decades. My own personal impression has always been that his thinking was always focused on art and that he is generally a kind of person who gets over things easily and does not complain but puts aside problems inconvenient for him with the greatest of ease.

It is typical that Zathureczky does not refer to the depth of their relationship – perhaps to avoid seeming biased –, he merely says: “I met Dohnányi 20 years ago.” Sándor Jemnitz, on the other hand, states outright that he had been “good friends” with Dohnányi for many years.⁵⁵ Although this claim is definitely not true, Jemnitz presumably meant to emphasize the same thing as Zathureczky, i.e. as if he had implicitly agreed with the statement that Dohnányi “had been known ... as a liberal thinker for years.” In his opinion, however, a kind of ideological turn had taken place in the recent past and the reasons were the following:

In 1941, he started a relationship with Elza Salacz [Mrs Ilona Zachár Salacz], who was known to belong to far-right circles. Dohnányi’s later conduct and political stance were due to her influence. ... This was evidenced in late 1943 or early 1944 when he gave an interview to a journalist from the paper *Összetartás*,⁵⁶ who was also a friend of Elza Salacz.⁵⁷

The interview in *Összetartás* was examined by László Sárközi, the investigating police lieutenant who wrote the report, but he also concluded that the suspect “commented only on music, and made similar statements on several occasions, in which I did not discover any political tendency.”⁵⁸ In his report summarizing the investigation, the main focus was on Dohnányi’s meeting with Szálasi, which Jemnitz refers to in his statement.⁵⁹ But Jemnitz does not repeat his serious allegation that had been included in the minutes of the Academy certification committee a year before, notably that it was Dohnányi who compiled the list of the guests to be invited to Szálasi’s event. Instead, he merely voices his opinion, which is confirmed by a filmed document: “Ernő Dohnányi is shown in the film with a warm smile engaged in a long handshake with Szálasi”⁶⁰ – this statement was incidentally recorded in the report as Dohnányi “looking at Szálasi with awe.”⁶¹ Finally, it is perhaps worth highlighting from the content of the report that it actually mentions Dohnányi’s current whereabouts – it is mistaken, though, as the composer had already returned from England and was giving concerts in Vienna by then –, and that he is supported by the Americans and wishes to emigrate to the United States. Zathureczky might have added the remark to his statement to reassure the authorities that Dohnányi “has no

⁵⁵“Witness statement / Sándor Jemnitz” (translated from Hungarian), October 17, 1946. BFL XVII.1518.

⁵⁶Pál TAKSONYI, “A mai népi magyar zene nem hozott újat a modern zeneszerzés szempontjából. Dohnányi Ernő nyilatkozik az *Összetartás*nak” [Today’s folk musical trends in Hungarian music haven’t brought anything new to modern composition], *Összetartás* 1/45 (November 12, 1943), 5. See: Veronika KUSZ (ed.), *Dohnányi Ernő: Válogatott írások és nyilatkozatok* [Ernő Dohnányi: Selected writings and statements] (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2020), 434–439.

⁵⁷“Witness statement / Sándor Jemnitz” (translated from Hungarian), October 17, 1946. BFL XVII.1518.

⁵⁸“Report / László Sárközi” (translated from Hungarian), November 28, 1946. BFL XVII.1518.

⁵⁹The recording is available in National Film Institute Hungary’s Film Archives: “Filmhíradók online” [Newsreels online] <<https://filmhíradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=5861>> (last accessed: January 26, 2022).

⁶⁰“Witness statement / Sándor Jemnitz” (translated from Hungarian), October 17, 1946. BFL XVII.1518.

⁶¹“Report / László Sárközi” (translated from Hungarian), November 28, 1946. BFL XVII.1518.



intention of returning to Hungary”⁶² – but in fact, this point, which was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews in the United States, made him an enemy in the eyes of communist leaders and certainly influenced his evaluation in Hungary in the 1950s.

5. THE END OF THE STORY

Zathureczky himself left Hungary in 1956, and after a tumultuous decade and a half he could meet Dohnányi again in America. “... it seems indeed like a dream to be together again. They are sweet and good to me – and we play a lot of music” – the violinist wrote to a friend in January 1958.⁶³ We do not know whether in those unthinkable days they were talking about those similarly unthinkable times when Zathureczky had to testify about Dohnányi. In any case, the incomparably valuable sound recordings made of their playing together during those few days⁶⁴ suggest that they were concentrating on revisiting their shared musical past rather than on political discussions. Zathureczky, in any case, was able to report on what he had experienced in the proceedings against Dohnányi: for instance that after the events described above, in the autumn of 1947, the case had yet “another wave” when an arrest warrant was even issued against Dohnányi⁶⁵ – this event, which was without any antecedents or consequences, was the result of a change in foreign policy that led to the listing of several persons in Western Europe who had been convicted by the People’s Prosecutor’s Office.⁶⁶ After that, however, there is only one official source linked to the events of Dohnányi’s prosecution: the document of his acquittal. Interestingly, Zathureczky was again involved: Dohnányi’s impresario, Andor Schulhof, requested various official certificates from Hungary, for which he also asked the director of the Academy for help. Thus, the official part of Dohnányi’s case in Hungary ends with the following exchange of letters:

Budapest, July 7, 1949

To the Hungarian Minister of Justice,

Please kindly inform me officially if Ernő Dohnányi, former director general of the Academy of Music, was or is indeed on the list of war criminals, or whether the news is true that he was removed from the list of war criminals and he was at that time (as far as we know in 1946) informed about this in writing.

Sincerely,

Director General Zathureczky

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Zathureczky’s letter to Béla Szécsi, January 30, 1958. See: Adalbert WAGNER and Béla SZÉCSI, *Zenei csillagok között* [Among musical stars] (Munich: Dr. Paul Flach, 1984), 46.

⁶⁴The unpublished recordings are available in the Dohnányi Collection of Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities, Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music.

⁶⁵“Arrest warrant [against Ernő Dohnányi] / [illegible signature] council chair judge and people’s judges” (translated from Hungarian), October 1947, 16. BFL XVII.1518. The circumstances of the issue of the arrest warrant and the events related in general to Dohnányi’s prosecution after 1946 will be summarized in a future study.

⁶⁶See for example: Sándor MÁTRAI, “Ötezer háborús bűnöst adnak ki” [Five thousand war criminals will be extradited], *Kis Újság* 1/61 (September 6, 1947), 3.



Budapest, July 30, 1949

To the Director General of the National Hungarian Liszt Academy of Music, Budapest,

With reference to your request I hereby inform you that the People's Prosecutor's Office of Budapest has terminated the investigation on the subject under Section 3 of Bp 101.

On the order of the minister

dr. Sándor Halász state attorney signed by his own hand⁶⁷

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⁶⁷For the edition of the exchange of letters, see: GÁDOR and SZIRÁNYI, "Liszt Academy / Dohnányi's certification," 422–423.

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