

## Chapter 6

# Homosexuals and the labour service system in Horthy's Hungary

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**T**here is very limited information available on the lives of gay and lesbian people during and before the Second World War in Hungary, mainly because of a lack of sources and testimonies available in what is a largely new field of research. However, we can describe at least some aspects of the increasingly visible homosexual subculture in Budapest before the war.

It is important to underline that between 1878 and 1961 male homosexual behaviour was criminalised under the category of “unnatural fornication” in the Hungarian Criminal Code. The beginning of the 20th century found Hungary in the “age of dualism” after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, characterised by complete independence regarding domestic policy but with surrendered state sovereignty in foreign and military policies (Fónagy 2005). This is the period when Károly Csemegi, Secretary of State of the Ministry of the Interior, created the Criminal Code of 1878, including paragraph 241 that rendered homosexuality – or literally “perversion against nature” (*természet elleni fajtalanság*, a largely unspecified term) – an illegal act punishable by up to one year’s imprisonment. The Criminal Code of 1878 remained for almost a century: through the First World War, at the end of which the Hapsburg emperor abdicated in 1918; the first Hungarian Republic, which was formed in the spring of 1919; the first “Communist experiment” in Hungary, a Soviet-type republic with proletarian dictatorship, which was followed by a counter-revolution and the Horthy regime. Csemegi’s code was still in place in March 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary, in the years from 1945 to 1948 when “tentative democracy” turned into communist rule, and also during the 1950s. It was only in 1961 that the “unnatural fornication” clause changed and the general prosecution for homosexuality ceased (citing medical arguments that homosexuality was a biological phenomenon and therefore could not be handled legally as a crime). However, the maximum penalty for engaging in “unnatural fornication” with a partner under the age of 20 or causing a public scandal was still three years’ imprisonment.<sup>127</sup> As

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127. In 1961, different ages of consent were set for heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and this remained the case until 2002, when following the judgment of the Constitutional Court an equal age of consent (14) for all was introduced. While the age of consent for heterosexual relationships remained 14 in 1961, the age of consent for homosexual relationships was set at 20 in 1961 and at 18 between 1978 and 2002. See Takács (2007).

20th-century Hungarian legislation rendered homosexual activities illicit, it provided a sufficient basis for developing a state-run system of social control and surveillance of homosexuals or, more precisely, people who could be suspected of being homosexual or engaging in homosexual acts.<sup>128</sup>

### **Homosexuality in Hungary in the interwar period**

In 1926, one of the first books in Hungarian fully devoted to the “modern aspects of the homosexual problem” was published: here the author referred to homosexuality as a social problem, recurring suddenly after the First World War as a mass phenomenon, and as a “burning issue of the modern era” that could not be ignored (Pál 1926: 60). The rapid expansion of homosexual life, the “great homosexual tide flooding Budapest” (ibid.), was presented as an inherent feature of world-scale urbanisation and the development of Budapest into a world-class metropolis. By the author’s estimate, by the 1920s the number of *urnings*<sup>129</sup> was over 10 000 in Budapest. They had several venues to meet and interact, including bath houses and vapour baths, and inner-city locations, most of which would remain popular cruising areas for several decades.

In 1929, a group of journalists and police officers published a two-volume work, *Modern criminality* (Turcsányi 1929), where the authors, following Krafft-Ebing’s aetiology, distinguished between acquired and inborn forms of homosexuality and pointed out that when beginning homosexual activity people with acquired homosexuality did not yet have that “unbelievable and unexplainable skill with which they are able to recognise each other”. Thus sometimes they wrongly pursued “normal men”, who would “naturally be repulsed” or even report them to the police, and “[t]hese unsuccessful attempts bring them to those well-known places, where the pathologically inclined homosexuals” gather: public toilets, parks and public bath houses – where they could find suitable partners; however, they could also fall into the hands of extortionists and male prostitutes (ibid.: 121).

In 1933 a practising doctor of the Royal Hungarian Public Health Institute published a study fully devoted to the issue of homosexual male prostitution: his Hungarian data source was a secret police file from 1932, containing a list of 1 695 male homosexual prostitutes. Here prostitution was defined in the context of a person making their body available for the lust of others in order to gain financial profit or social advantage or both; however, the author also pointed out that in a social environment where homosexual activities “clash with the dominant moral views, being despised and detested by heterosexuals, persecuted by the state, proscribed by religious rules and punishable by the law” (Szántó 1933: 3), the luxury of having a same-sex sexual partner was reserved for those with greater social advantages.

In 1934, Zoltán Nemes-Nagy, a Hungarian psychiatrist and neurologist, devoted a whole chapter of his study of sexual pathology to “Homosexuals in Budapest”, where

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128. This state-run system of social control remained in operation during state socialism, too. See Takács (2015).

129. *Urnings* are men, belonging to a transitional third gender, who love other men. The term, inspired by Plato’s *Symposium*, was coined by the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-95)..

he highlighted the fact that the Hungarian capital was “the first metropolitan city in the whole world where semi-official records [had been] compiled on homosexuals” for about 15 years. Budapest police had data on about 5 000 men, including “mainly passive homosexuals and those, who commit unnatural fornication for material interest” (Nemes-Nagy 1934: 73). The collected data included the following elements: name, place and date of birth, religious affiliation, marital status, occupation, address, place apprehended, nationality, knowledge of languages, female name, inclination, company, height, way of speaking, details on appearance (eyes, mouth, nose, ears, face, hands, hair, moustache, beard, special distinguishing marks), details of any previous criminal record, and three photographs (ibid.: 73-4). The author estimated “the real number” of homosexual men in Budapest was about 15 000, most of whom would never be detected as they moved in “up-scale circles, carefully trying to avoid publicity and any kind of scandal leading to the police” (ibid.: 73).

In the 1930s Budapest was a spatially ordered, modern city, characterised by designated public spaces mainly serving the interests of the higher middle classes. While for most urbanites meeting – cultural and biographical – strangers, coming from previously separate real and symbolic worlds, is merely an unavoidable concomitant of living in a modern city, for homosexual life the emergence of the unique social psychological space of the public realm provides a previously unknown dynamic (Lofland 1973). In larger cities like Budapest, with established meeting places and patterns of decodable behaviour, people attracted to others of the same sex, being potentially liberated from much tighter forms of social control characterising smaller settlements, could submerge themselves in a world of strangers and try to act as a homosexual, not just be one. With official or semi-official lists of homosexuals having been compiled in Budapest since at least the early 1920s, it suggests that same-sex desires were socially recognised and, at the same time, unrecognised during the early decades of the 20th century, and these processes continued for the rest of the century.

### **Horthy’s labour service system**

Recently, a document from 1942 was uncovered in the Hungarian War Archive (*Hadtörténelmi Levéltár*),<sup>130</sup> which has added to the still very scarce historical evidence showing that during the Second World War homosexuals were also targets of life-threatening state control in Hungary. A list of 993 alleged homosexuals was part of the correspondence between the State Security Centre and the Minister of Defence, contemplating whether or not to use them as forced labourers within the wartime labour service system.

The wartime labour service system was a special phenomenon of the Horthy regime, a period of Hungarian history named after Miklós Horthy, regent of the Hungarian Kingdom between 1920 and 1944 (this period of Hungarian history is often described as a kingdom without a king, ruled by an admiral without a fleet, in a country without a coastline). The obligation of home defence-related labour service (*honvédelmi*

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130. Original archive document of the Hungarian War Archive (*Hadtörténelmi Levéltár*): No. HM 68763/Eln.1b. – 1942.

*munkakötelezettség*) was originally introduced by Act No. II of 1939 on Home Defence. According to Randolph Braham, who has done extensive research on this topic:

the Hungarian labor service system was conceived as part of the anti-Semitic policies pursued by Hungarian governments in tandem with the Third Reich. The system was established in 1939 when Hungary's political, diplomatic, and economic relations with Germany bore the first fruits of its revisionist ambitions. By that time the Jews of Hungary were defined along racial lines and deprived of many of their basic civil, economic, and human rights. Even during the first phase of its operation (July 1939-April 1941), the labor service system was discriminatory. Although labor servicemen were allowed to wear army uniforms at work, they were identified as unreliable and forbidden to bear arms (2004: 59).<sup>131</sup>

The 69059/1942 Decree of the Minister of Defence extended the scope of the law to all Jewish men aged 18 to 48:

[By] early 1942 Jewish officers were deprived of their rank and labor servicemen were not only compelled to wear their own clothes and footwear, but also a yellow or white armband that identified them as easy targets for abuse. The treatment of labor servicemen varied from company to company depending on the attitude of the commanding officers. In general, however, Jewish labor servicemen were treated as pariahs and abused by the Christian officers and guards . . . Their daily life was not fundamentally different from that of the Jews who lingered in German concentration camps. Like the victims in those camps, labor servicemen were often subjected to punitive treatment by officers and guards, deprived of their possessions and basic needs (including adequate shelter, nutrition, and sanitary care), and subjected to unimaginable tortures. Countless thousands were executed on order or on the whim of sadistic German and Hungarian soldiers. Moreover, many labor servicemen ended up in German concentration camps after being discharged from the service or as a consequence of their withdrawal from the frontlines (ibid.: 59-60).

The aim of the wartime labour service system was to keep the politically unreliable elements of society – primarily Jews, but also communists and members of non-Hungarian ethnic groups – away from armed military service and at the same time force them to take part in the war effort. This is how the unarmed home defence labour service came into being, leading to the death of thousands of forced labourers who were sent to the front lines without sufficient equipment and supplies.

The correspondence between the State Security Centre and the Minister of Defence, consisting of four letters and two attached lists, began on 7 November 1942 with a proposal on behalf of the former (within the Ministry of Home Affairs)<sup>132</sup> addressing the latter as follows:

Please, call up into the home defence labour service the homosexual individuals, being unreliable regarding public morality, located within the territory of the capital, Budapest, listed in the attached register. Please, inform us about your Honour's decision.<sup>133</sup>

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131. For more details on the Hungarian forced labour service see Braham (1977). For a detailed discussion of the anti-Semitic policies pursued by Hungarian governments in the first half of the 20th century see Karsai (2005).

132. The State Security Centre was established within the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1942.

133. HM 68763/Eln.1b. – 1942.

On the same day the request of the State Security Centre was sent out for internal discussion on behalf of the Minister of Defence "pro domo" within the Ministry of Defence. This letter stated that the "Ministry of Home Affairs, (more precisely: the State Security Centre) requests that officially registered homosexuals, being residents of Budapest, should be called up into the home defence labour service".

Regarding this request the Department of Military Organisation and Mobilisation submitted the following arguments:

According to Act No. II of 1939 suitable individuals on the basis of their occupation or education can be employed for home defence labour. Everyone should be employed in the best possible way to serve the interest of home defence. [Thus]...there is no legal possibility to mobilize these [homosexual] people for home defence labour service. The department also considered the possibility of mobilizing them for military service ... [by taking into consideration that] previously socially harmful individuals (prisoners, internees) were divided into two groups: those who are reliable and those who are unreliable regarding (their) national loyalties. Those in the first group were assigned to active service, while the others were used in special labour companies. ... [however] in the view of the department these people cannot be categorized as unreliable regarding their national loyalties, therefore they should be assigned to active military service, which is by no means a desirable solution. Regardless, those listed in the (attached) register should be divided into the following groups:

- a) Jews;
- b) non-Jews;
- c) those who completed military service;
- d) those who have been enlisted;
- e) those who have not completed military service;
- f) those exempted from conscription because of their age;

and we should follow a different procedure in each case – but the attached register does not include the necessary data [on the basis of which these category memberships could be established]... [In summary, on the basis of the above] it would not be desirable to look for solutions in the military line: this issue requires an explicit policing (administrative) solution as there is no hope of changing the character of these degenerated neurotic individuals.<sup>134</sup>

It was also added that there was "an increasing tendency to offer the scum of the population for military use, while these procedures would hurt the feelings of those other impeccable individuals who participate in the war, when they see that the [military] service gains a primarily punitive character".

Additionally, one officer made the following note in handwriting: "It is undoubtedly useful, if mainly the nationally useless elements decay...". Another lieutenant referred in a handwritten comment to the possibility of collecting homosexuals into special labour force companies and employing them outside the country's borders; however, "in this case they would get into the same category with those being unreliable regarding (their) national loyalties", thus the question emerges: "would it be useful to make all these men meet and get to know each other more closely? I certainly wouldn't advise that."<sup>135</sup>

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134. HM 68763/Eln.1b. – 1942.

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Nevertheless, on 11 November 1942, another short letter arrived from the State Security Centre, addressed again to the Minister of Defence, requesting similar treatment for an additional 184 men to those 810 alleged homosexuals whose data had already been sent on 7 November. The two lists consisted of data on 993 men, including their name, place and date of birth, religious denomination, family status, occupation, first name of father (or an indication of being an illegitimate child), their mother's name and (possibly the last-known) address. Data on two further individuals are missing because the paper part of their records was cut out with scissors "on the basis of a conversation with the Chief Commissioner", as handwritten margin notes testify.

### **Alleged homosexuals**

Most of these "listed" allegedly homosexual men were in their late 20s (with an average age of 29, in an age range of between 16 and 48), and worked as manual labourers (about 160 of them as farmhands and about 80 in commerce): there were only a few intellectuals and artists among them (for example, 3 actors, 8 musicians and only 1 journalist). Some 29 of the 993 men were married, 46 had been illegitimate children and 37 had their address given as "prison". Regarding religious affiliation, there were 629 Roman Catholics, 167 Jews, 127 Calvinists, 24 Evangelicals and 19 Greek Catholics – these numbers are in line with the division of denominations in the population of Budapest in the early 1940s.<sup>136</sup>

It is a matter of concern that the origin of these lists cannot be established, but it can be supposed that they came from police files. The phrase "officially registered homosexuals" used in the correspondence can support this supposition.

The final item of the correspondence that has come to light is a (possibly draft) reply of 3 December 1942 from the Minister of Defence addressed to the Minister of Home Affairs, stating that: "I have no means to follow your Honour's recommendation to take these homosexual individuals into military service".

So far these are the only known documents that can provide a link between the history of homosexuality in Hungary and the Holocaust, and this link is not a very strong one, as at present, besides archive documents on criminal court cases, there are no historical data available to explain what happened in Hungary during the 1940s to alleged homosexuals in general, and to these 993 listed men from Budapest in particular. Unfortunately, the content of most of the wartime court cases cannot be accessed any longer; for example, for the period between 1938 and 1951 only five "unnatural fornication" court case files remained accessible in the Budapest City Archives, while according to the archive's index books there used to be many more case files from the late 1930s and the 1940s, most of which must have been destroyed after the war. Additionally, at the National Archives of Hungary, there are also a few criminal case reports, where the race defilement law (Act XV of 1941) that enforced racial segregation at the level of intimate relationships, including sexual acts between Jews and non-Jews, was applied to "unnatural fornication" cases. From one of these reports we can learn about a case from 1943 when a 39-year-old Jewish man who

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136. I would like to thank Péter Tibor Nagy for sharing this data with me on the basis of a contemporary yearbook of statistics (*Budapest székesfőváros statisztikai évkönyve 1944-1946*).

paid a 17-year-old boy to conduct oral sex with him was charged with “unnatural fornication” and sentenced to internment.<sup>137</sup>

Compiling “homosexual inventories”, which listed potential blackmail victims who could be convinced or coerced into becoming police informers, was part of regular police work in urban areas and especially in Budapest from at least the 1920s onwards (Takács 2014). These practices are also reflected in archive documents of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára – ÁBTL), where one of the alleged homosexuals from the 1942 “homosexual lists” was also traced.

Perhaps surprisingly this man, a journalist – actually the only journalist on the 1942 list – appears in the socialist state’s secret police files under the code name “Urbán” as a source who was recruited to become a police informer on the basis of “patriotic conviction” in 1959. However, the secret police files of the “Urbán dossiers” do not contain any information that could shed light on how he became registered on the homosexual list compiled by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1942. In fact, it seemed that the socialist state’s secret police did not know anything about this – homosexual list-related – detail of his life. Another secret police report from 1959 indicates that in 1940 he was displaced as a journalist because he was Jewish, and was sent on home defence-related labour service duty as a Jew in 1942. According to the secret police documents of the ÁBTL, “Urbán’s” main job as a police informer was to report on his journalist colleagues and Western contacts from Vienna, a job he fulfilled with varying degrees of success until he defected in 1973 and settled in Australia. However, this is – at least in part – a different story, relevant to a discussion of how people could be forced and/or convinced to become police informers during the era of state socialism.

Even though there is only limited information available on the “homosexual way of existence” (Bech 1997) in Hungary in the first half of the 20th century, on the basis of historical evidence on elements of homosexual life before the Second World War, Budapest can be seen as a spatially ordered modern city, characterised by specialised public-space use (Lofland 1973). Pre-Second World War Budapest, with its established meeting places and patterns of decodable behaviour, seemed to be able to provide a new dynamic for homosexual life; as can be seen, it is not too difficult to find empirical evidence for the existence of a semi-secretive homosexual subcultural infrastructure, for example, in the form of the surveillance system that was introduced to control it. Twentieth-century Hungarian legislation rendered homosexual activities illicit (especially before 1961, when the general prosecution of “unnatural fornication” ceased to exist) and provided a sufficient basis for developing a state-run system of social control and surveillance of people engaging in homosexual acts.

This chapter has presented historical evidence about the existence of two special Hungarian lists of 993 alleged homosexuals from 1942, compiled for official state use in the context of the wartime labour service system, a special characteristic of

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137. I would like to thank Gábor Szegedi for directing my attention to these cases and to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive, where an index of the Personal Records of the Hungarian Ministry of Internal Affairs (1939-1944) can be found at [http://collections.ushmm.org/findingaids/RG-39.008M\\_01\\_fnd\\_hu.pdf](http://collections.ushmm.org/findingaids/RG-39.008M_01_fnd_hu.pdf), accessed 28 June 2017.

the Horthy regime. Besides archive documents on criminal court cases, these documents can provide the only currently known link between the history of homosexuality in Hungary and the Holocaust. Unfortunately, there is no historical data available to find out exactly what happened in Hungary during the 1940s to alleged homosexuals. It is clear that at the end of 1942 the Ministry of Defence denied the request of the State Security Centre (within the Ministry of Home Affairs) to conscript a list of registered homosexuals from Budapest into forced labour service, but the actual fate of most of the 993 men whose names were on the homosexual lists is uncertain. Further research would be needed to find out more about the treatment of Hungarian homosexuals not only during but also before and after the war. Additionally, it should also be pointed out that the extent and durability of Hungarian surveillance of homosexual men would make it worthwhile investigating this topic in a wider central and eastern European context as well.

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