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"...I beg Your Excellency, that you take steps":
József Mindszenty, the Archbishop of Esztergom
in the Documents of the National Archives
and Records Administration (USA):
Part I: 1945–1948

Margit Balogh

The name of József Mindszenty, the last Hungarian Prince Primate became world-
famous as the symbol of fight against communism. He fulfilled the honour of the
Archbishop of Esztergom and hereupon the honour of Prince Primate between 1945
and 1974 (after 1950 the title was in use without the prefix "Prince"). On December 26,
1948, he was taken into custody by the police authorities on the commonplace charges
of the totalitarian regimes, such as conspiracy aimed at the overthrow of the repub-
lic, spying and currency trafficking, and on February 8, 1949, he was sentenced to
life imprisonment, deprivation of political rights and confiscation of property. The
sentence called the attention of the world to the violation of human rights and the
discussion on the Hungarian situation was put on the agenda by the UN, too. The 1956
revolution put an end to the years of his imprisonment but after three and a half days
of freedom, in the morning of November 4, 1956, József Mindszenty requested and got
refuge at the American Legation Budapest. It is without precedent in world-history
that a cardinal of the Catholic Church lived in diplomatic protection at a legation for
15 years, in a voluntary captivity chosen by himself.

Forming a judgement of his activities fluctuates between extremes, from
uncritical canonisation to degrading demonisation. It is undeniable that
a Mindszenty-phenomenon has existed up to the present, and it is just like an evil: it
cannot be grasped; because if we consider the Head of Church, he cannot be critici-
zed, since he was the leading figure of the national resistance of the time; if someone
means to grasp his role and activity as a politician, he is covered with the cope of
the Cardinal who suffered imprisonment. A collection of sources, essential to the
historical analysis, can be found in the United States of America: a lot of documents
have survived, mainly owing to the one and a half decade at the Legation; but on
account of his public role, the name of Mindszenty appears in the American sources
from 1945. The following paper is written on the basis of the documents kept in the
National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, Maryland); but rele-
vant documents can be found in abundance in any one of the 1945–1974 American
presidential archives — Harry S. Truman Library (Independence, Missouri), Dwight
D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas), John F. Kennedy Presidential

Library and Museum (Boston, Massachusetts), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and
Museum (Austin, Texas), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum (Yorba
Linda, California).

"IT WAS NOT SIBERIA THAT WAS PROMISED..."

H. P. Arthur Schoenfeld, the 56-year old representative of the American diplomatic
service in Budapest, had been staying in Hungary for barely three months when he
heard the name of József Mindszenty for the first time. On April 30, 1945, he informed
his State Secretary about the visit of Count József Pálffy, the leader of the Christian-
Democratic People's Party that was being organized at that time, who asked him
confidentially to forward his personal recommendation to Rome on the vacant seat
of the Prince Primate of Esztergom. Count Pálffy recommended József Pálffy, Jes-
uit, and József Mindszenty, Bishop of Veszprém; and out of the two he preferred the
bishop. However, the experienced diplomat considered the "posting" of the recom-
mandation politically very risky; he was afraid that the bare fact of the mediation
would generate distrust and suspicion in the Soviet-American relation. As Hungary
was strategically unimportant in the post-war foreign policy of the United States, it
is obvious that he wanted to avoid even the slightest conflict with the Soviets on
the succession of the Primacy.

On September 16, 1945, József Mindszenty was appointed as Archbishop of Esz-
tergom by Pope Pius XII, without any American mediation. The new Primate took
possession of his powers energetically, very confidently and with exaggerated hopes.
Naturally, he also considered the pastoral work as the primary function of the church.
But he added to this: although it is a necessary evil, taking up a position in public po-
litical issues, or informing the congregation on party politics questions belong to the
interpretation of the gospel.

Since the same community of people constitute the state as well, he considered
politics as possible means of apologetics. His manifestations as Primate were based
on a clear-cut opinion: relying on the historic constitutional role of the Prince Pri-
mate, as a mental-spiritual leader of Hungarian Catholics, he felt it is his duty to
direct people not only in questions of religious life and ethics but in public and social
issues as well. He countened on the Western democracies to enforce human rights
and freedom of religion, and he especially expected America — as a symbol of democracy
and human rights — to make a stand against the violation of law.

For this reason the Hungarian Prince Primate carried on very intensive corre-
spendence with the American diplomatic corps in Budapest. One group of his letters,
which arrived almost monthly, relentlessly calls attention to the various grievances
of the church, in an abrupt style, not unusual from him. Another significant group of
the documents deals with various matters of Hungarian domestic politics, and a fur-

1 Magyar Országos Levéltár (hereafter MOL), XX–10–4. Legfőbb Ügynökség-Politikai Oktály
(hereafter LUP/O), 18.300/1989. The incoming telegram of the American Department of
State, No. 1871, Budapest, April 30, 1945.
him, protesting against the deprivation of civil rights of the Hungarians living in Slovakia. He asked the addresses to help in the same way as they had earlier helped the Jews. In the summer of 1948 he blamed Alexej Čepička, Czechoslovak Minister of Justice, because nothing was realized from his promises concerning the freedom of religion. On August 10, 1948, he wrote to Ambassador Chapin about a slave market, extinguishing embryos and endless deportations.

It would be naive to believe that Mindszenty’s entreaties mixed with protests led to the cessation of deportations, confiscations of property and mass sentences of tribunal courts in Czechoslovakia. Though, the call for assistance heard by the Western powers did not come from an ordinary man, as the Hungarian Head of Church criticized the condemnation of Hungarians (and Germans) on the basis of collective responsibility, as well as the policy of Beneš, who considered their expulsion from their homeland as “national revolutionary objective”, his criticism came from the heights of the universal church. Without the conceptual attitude of the Western democracies shown on the Paris Peace Conference, the government of Prague presumably would have eliminated the Hungarian minority community. Although the proposal for the revision of the borders is political short-sightedness, raising the question of the legal offenses against Hungarians could have been the only consideration to elicit sympathy towards a German satellite state in the Western public opinion.

Mindszenty repeatedly called attention to the encroachments of the political police, the jurisdiction that was degenerated into the puppet of party policy and the multiplying “conspiracies”. In his letter dated on December 16, 1946, after having described the domestic political situation, he called upon the help of England and the United States as “protectors of freedom and justice” to halt the enormous pressure and the corruption. The Cardinal, who characterized himself as the only independent Hungarian, added that with the help of England and the United States there would be a possibility to solve these problems. In his letter dated on December 21, 1946, Ambassador Schoenfeld succinctly and decidedly refused the request of the Cardinal. “… you are of course aware of my Government’s long standing policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. This policy has proven over a long period of time and through many trying situations the best guarantee of spontaneous, vigorous and genuine democratic development. It will be clear to Your Eminence that it necessarily precludes action by this Legation which could properly be construed as interference in Hungarian domestic affairs or which lies outside the normal functions of diplomatic missions.” On 8 January 1947 he in-

formed the American Secretary of State in a confidential memorandum on the letters received from the Prince Primate. In his report he condemned Mindszenty’s initiative. “Apart from the risk to which Cardinal Mindszenty has subjected himself in writing these letters, I consider that they provide adequate evidence of the Prince Primate’s misunderstanding of diplomatic function and practice.” He thought it was worthwhile to mention that Mindszenty’s daring proposal was based on his conviction that in the near future a war would break out between the Soviet Union and the Western powers; and accordingly, the Cardinal did not want to allow any doubt for the future concerning which side the Hungarian Catholic Church supported, even if it involved personal martyrdom. It must be admitted that Mindszenty believed in another world war, and some irresponsible and unreliable political factors encouraged him to do so. In the mirror of it Mindszenty’s obstinacy is more understandable: he thought that any compromise with the new political power was impractical. His soul became as hard as steel, he was determined to endure till death, and he practically desired to turn into a hero. However, thus he created utopias, because the Westerners abandoned this region to the Soviets (they did not intervene here in effect until the collapse of the Soviet Union). Even in the colder and colder international political atmosphere, the Cardinal only transformed his desires into English-American interests.

As an answer for the reprimand of the ambassador, Mindszenty demanded an explanation for the unkept Anglo-Saxon promises: “Recalling that in the years of 1942-1944 we were promised democracy and not Siberia, or Russian and Marxist prisons in Hungary, I beg Your Excellency, Mr. Ambassador, to regard this as a kind of assistance to enforce the human rights guaranteed by the Allies, and put an end to this permanent persecution of people.”

A subsequent letter reveals real offensiveness: he described the American principle of non-interference as dangerous idealism that would be acceptable for Hungary only then if all the Allied Powers being present were of the same view. “The situation, however, is different today: the interference of detrimental violence is permanent and the benevolent succour () is neutral.” If the Powers observe the suppression of human rights, the spread of fear and poverty with cool resignation, they “…no more do not interfere into our inner affairs, but — negatively — seem to accept a partnership in the reprehensible actions of the other power and omit the support and the protection of their own great ideas and truths.” He thought that the answer of the ambassador was acceptable only in one case: if it was just a gesture towards the outside world, but otherwise he could not trust him.}


He treated the Paris Peace Settlement disappointedly and with emphasis. Concerning the future he concluded that the fact that the Soviet Army remained here, brought the appearance of independence: “The CPU, the undisguised as well as the secret prisons remain, the deportations will continue. Conspiracies will be discovered day after day. The last Hungarian properties will be carried away innumerably. The only help” — said the Cardinal — “if the United States purchased all the Russian claims on Hungary, and the final claim of the purchase would be the complete withdrawal.” His proposal could have been encouraged by the fact that in the summer of 1945 the USA criticized the Hungarian-Soviet economic and trade agreement. Yet the USA did not encourage the refusal of the ratification, and at time passed, they could influence the events still less and also, they did not really want to do so. As early as at the beginning of 1946, Ambassador Schoenfeld described Hungary as a Soviet economic colony, and claimed that his country could not do much against it without risking the European stability and peace. By then it became clear: the Soviets do not accept an ambiguous situation in Hungary, and they will effectuate the complete communist takeover.

The Archbishop of Estergym had contacts with two American diplomats between 1945 and 1948: with Arthur Schoenfeld and Selden Chapin. The two diplomats maintained different relations to the Hungarian prelate. Schoenfeld was reserved; his reports reveal cold logic and only mild sympathy. “...The Cardinal unable to understand the recent Hungarian realities” — he wrote about him once still in the middle of 1946.11 Selden Chapin arrived at Hungary in the summer of 1947, in the midst of the preparatory elections. Mindszenty had got a positive reference about him earlier, personally from Otto Habsburg, who emphasised that Chapin was an active Catholic, opposite to the Jewish Schoenfeld. The new ambassador used the salutation “Dear Mr. Cardinal Mindszenty” in his letters, and just a month after his arrival at his post, on 15 August 1947 he paid a formal call in Estergym. However, the greater cordiality did not mean the abandonment of the aloofness of American diplomacy. Although the alliance having been formed during the World War disintegrated and the Cold War era commenced, the American diplomacy did not promise any kind of intervention in Hungary. From the viewpoint of the global interests of the United States of America, Eastern Europe — and within that Hungary — was considered as “secondary”. Therefore, the new ambassador, Selden Chapin maintained a closer and more personal relationship with Mindszenty, but he did not encourage him for resistance and did not mislead him with hopes of war. Though, he did not really try to dissuade him. For the present just one letter is known, in which he took a clear stand on the issue of the war.
he responded to Mindszenty’s question whether "he should prepare for a short or a long term accommodation with Communists since apparently" — according to him — "war was inevitable." The ambassador reported to his superiors: “I told him that I did not personally share the opinion that war was inevitable, I said that I felt I could go so far as to say that US certainly would never attack first and to best my knowledge and belief Soviet Government itself did not wish war but that of course there was always a possibility that some irresponsible persons might bring about a prestige situation which would have serious results.” Mindszenty could have interpreted the equivocal answer of the ambassador as an encouragement.

Mindszenty’s letter of April 6, 1948, which is rather unusual as regards to its contents, indicates the cordiality of their relationships: the Cardinal asked the American ambassador to help one of his men, who has a certification-letter in Latin language, and his three companions to leave the country. In these days hot contest took place for the church schools, and in connection with it the Catholic Church was unavoidably marked as “clerical reaction”; and only eight months later, on December 26, 1948, József Mindszenty was arrested by the political police, and among other things he was accused of spying for the Americans. His letters — the drafts or copies of which were shown to the state security by Secretaries Andrász Zakar, when the Primate’s Palace was being searched — were cited profusely in the lawsuit against him.

In the course of the trial Mindszenty — with the expression used by him repeatedly — “fundamentally admitted” the charges brought up against him, and described the introduced evidence, which were mainly the letters written by him, as authentic. He repeatedly regretted the past, and made promises as to the future. Quoting his words from the original sound records kept in the Sound Archives of the Hungarian Radio, the Cardinal said about the letters as follows: "I divide these documents into three groups. In the first group there is a smaller group that was written and addressed but was not sent but remained, and such letters were put among the evidence, too. Not all of them were sent, every single one, which is here among the evidence, but I emphasize that it is the minority. [...] The greater part was really sent. The primary objective of these [...] was not to uncover mistakes and their primary objective was not to harm, to blackmail; the objective was to help somehow but the good and right was not carried out rightly. Anyhow, it would have been more proper not to send these letters. Now I regret that I sent them. [...] In addition, there was a third group, and as a matter of fact, this falls within the second category, too; and [...] namely, these were sent in favour of the Hungarian war prisoners, sent to foreign powers about the control over Hungarian war prisoners practiced by the Red Cross, also, in favour of the Hungarians who were deported and persecuted in Hungarian territory [...] I could not avoid it. I had to write those letters, and my regret does not includes those matters, because here I fulfilled a pastoral and humanitarian duty.” Notwithstanding the “fundamental” confession, József Mindszenty persisted on his activity, displayed in favour of the protection of human rights.

SANCTIONS AND PROTESTS

It presented a serious problem to the diplomats, how their states should express their opinion on the arrest of the Cardinal, then on his life imprisonment: presenting an official protest, a declaration of condemnation or merely sending messages through the press. In spite of the advice of his colleagues, the British H. McNell, Minister of State at the Foreign Office, wanted to protest officially against the arrest of the Archbishop in any case, for domestic political reasons. He did not worry about the possible worsening of the situation of Mindszenty, because according to him the Archbishop, whatever happens, strives for martyrdom. Selden Chapin, the Chief of the American Mission, proposed American-British commercial sanctions on a global scale as a weapon against the East-European states in the case of Mindszenty. He considered the events as a part of the anti-religious campaign of the communists, and urged the international action of all organizations devoted to freedom and religion.

According to the British, the following factors argued in favour of the protest: the pressure of public opinion, the accompanying domestic political benefit, as well as the opinion that the protest would not increase the communist anti-papacy against the archbishop and would not lead to his execution; because the effect of his expulsion, imprisonment or execution would be the same: Mindszenty was no more the focus of the Hungarian resistance against communists. One of the arguments against the protest was that with the charges leveled against the Cardinal — currency trafficking, spying, treason — the communists skillfully avoided the issue of human rights. The proofs of the prosecutor’s office could be insufficient and falsified according to the Western way of thinking, but they admitted that it created satisfactory basis for the lawsuit. The formal British protest would provide the communists what they wish: an outside hostile step, against which the members of the earlier uncertain leadership could unite. Whereas, the public, general declarations of condemnation probably irritate them and make them cautious, but do not provide them a concrete target, against which they could unite. It is too soon to write off the Cardinal, he can be an important factor of the resistance and fight for religious freedom despite being in prison or in exile. Neither the French, nor the Americans decided on the formal protest.

16 "May I beg Your Excellence to kindly receive one of my faithful, who have a separate certification-letter in Latin language. He will tell all about of his aims which I believe very important and which I accept ad minus. Considering our circumstances I take extraordinary to beg Your Excellence to help him and his three companions to leave Hungary as soon as possible, and kindly intercede to secure them all support in this work for peace and interesting of Hungarian people." NARA, RG 84, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Hungary, Budapest Legation 1948, Box 167, 840.4 Catholic Church. The letter of József Mindszenty to Ambassador Chapin. Budapest, April 6, 1948. Original, English language, autograph.
18 The National Archives, London, Kew (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office 044045 (hereafter FO), (PIL 508, f. 1/25, 6. e.).
19 TNA, FO 044045 and FO 037/78585 (PIL 508, f. 1/25 and 122. 5. e.).
20 TNA, FO 037/78585/1263. Detailed description to the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Charles Batten on the problems ensuing from the Mindszenty-case. 1 February 1949. (PIL 508, f. 1/25, 6. e.).
In the end the press release of the American Department of State expressed profound indignation, and it confidentially advised to the American President not to intervene on behalf of Mindszenty, since it would be useless and unsuccessful. Only the official protest of the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations — that is: the governments of Australia, New-Zealand and Canada — is known; and it was of much less significance. However, when the Hungarians refused the presence of the British Mission in the course of the trial, the British government addressed a protesting declaration to the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which it promised countermeasures, and to maintain its rights based on the 1947 Peace Treaty. The waves of indignation reached the UN General Assembly. It did not alter the days of the prisoner at all: he was deprived of his personal liberty. Mindszenty was released from his captivity by the revolution on 30 October 1956, and its defeat took him to the Legation of the United States of America, where his long, voluntary confinement began that lasted 15 years.

ABSTRACT

The name of József Mindszenty became world-famous as the symbol of fight against communism. He fulfilled the honour of the Archbishop of Esztergom and heretofore the honour of Primate between 1945 and 1949. On 26 December 1948 he was taken into custody by the police authorities on the commonplace charges of the totalitarian regimes, such as conspiracy aimed at the overthrow of the republic, spying and currency trafficking, and on 8 February 1949 he was sentenced to life imprisonment, deprivation of political rights and confiscation of property. The sentence called the attention of the world to the violation of human rights and the discussion on the Hungarian situation was put on the agenda by the UN, too. The 1956 revolution put an end to the years of his imprisonment but after three and a half days of freedom, in the morning of 4 November 1956 József Mindszenty requested and got refuge at the American Legation Budapest. It is without precedent in world-history that a cardinal of the Catholic Church lived in diplomatic protection in a legation for 16 years, in a voluntary captivity chosen by himself.

Forming a judgement of his activities fluctuates between extremes, from uncritical canonisation to degrading demonisation. A collection of sources, essential to the historical analysis, can be found in the United States of America, a lot of documents have survived, mainly owing to the one and a half decade at the Legation; but on account of his public role, the name of Mindszenty appears in the American sources from 1945. The paper is written on the basis of the documents kept in the National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, Maryland).

The Archbishop of Esztergom had contacts with two American diplomats between 1945 and 1948: with Arthur Schoenfeld and Selden Chapin. The Hungarian Prince Primate carried on very intensive correspondence with the American diplomatic corps in Budapest. One group of his letters, which arrived almost monthly, relentlessly calls attention to the various grievances of the church, in an abrupt style, not unusual from him. Another significant group of the documents deals with various matters of Hungarian domestic politics, and a further one deals with human rights generally in Hungarian and international context. The American archival documents explicitly prove: there were hardly any significant political events that were not given an opinion by József Mindszenty at the leading primate of Hungary.

2) TNA, FO 371/78581. Public response from the British to the members of the Commonwealth. (FIL 508, F 1/326, 6. e.)
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