

“The Sisters of the Redeemer in the Trauma of Dispersion”.

The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer in the 1950s and 1960s in the Light of Recollections and State Security Reports

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ABSTRACT

While researching the history of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, also referred to as the *Sisters of the Redeemer*, it became clear that the ordeals of the Second World War and the Communist dictatorship had a profound impact on the congregation, which was engaged in nursing and teaching. The sources allow us to reconstruct the horrors of the advancing battlefield and the sisters' flight, along with their determination to provide social assistance and their role in saving Jews. The Communist regime that emerged after the war forced the congregation into an increasingly impossible situation, depriving them of their teaching positions and nursing vocation. Their internment in 1950 and the revocation of the congregation's operating license seemed to have eliminated the community entirely. However, recollections of the events of the 1950s and 1960s, together with state security reports, attest that the congregation survived in the form of a “subterranean stream,” and that tiny communities of sisters continued to pursue their monastic vocation, often in a single apartment that functioned as a mini convent. The traumas they had experienced rarely crushed the sisters' inner sense of peace, and they strove to cope with the harassments inflicted by the party-state by adapting to the new situation.

KEYWORDS

Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, advancing battlefield, internment, dispersion, underground existence, trauma

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In the present paper, I deal with a segment of the history of a women's religious community, the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer. The Hungarian branch of the order, along with many other Hungarian women's religious communities, experienced significant ordeals in the second half of the 20th century, from the advance of the battlefront right up until the fall of the socialist regime. Besides the hardships of the war, the sisters had to cope with being deprived of their vocation, in the form of their teaching and nursing work, and ultimately of their community and home — and essentially their monastic lifestyle, and thus of the fundamentally defining characteristics of their identity — by the emerging communist government. The trauma of being subjected to harassment and persecution, and to precarious and unpredictable situations, demanded new coping strategies and new approaches that would enable them to integrate, albeit far from smoothly, into the alien yet inescapable socialist society. In the recollections of the persecuted sisters, events are depicted in a far more nuanced way; alongside the pain, their negative experiences contain new feelings that reinforce the identity of the community and of the sisters belonging to it, who often experienced their ordeals as the treading of their chosen Christian path.

My work is organized around the junctures and turning points that represented the most distressing ordeals in the lives of the sisters between 1944 and 1989. Through events such as the advancing battlefront, the ban on teaching and then nursing, internment, and dispersion, along with the related survival strategies, it is possible to trace the tragedy and disappearance — but also the survival — of a community which, despite its relatively small size, had a significant impact on society. This apparent contradiction can be understood once we know that, following the elimination of the communities, those who survived still managed to retain their monastic identity in hiding. Forced to lead independent lives, these sisters nevertheless endeavored to maintain the daily routine they had followed in the community. The sources attest that some of the sisters kept their vows,¹ living together in groups of three or four when the opportunity arose, and essentially establishing small convents.

The most important source material when it comes to the ordeals suffered during the above-mentioned period is correspondence dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s. During these years, Sister Mária Elma Ribai,² who intended to compile a history of the order in Hungary,

¹There are no accurate data in the order's archives with respect to how many of the sisters opted for family life after the order was dispersed and how many continued to live according to their vows. It should be noted, however, that one of the confessions given in the criminal proceedings initiated against the Győr parish priest János Lányi and his companions in 1958 refers to the fact that several of the Sisters of the Redeemer married and started families. János Lányi met the released Hungarian archbishop in Budapest on November 2, 1956, during of the Hungarian Uprising. In the course of their conversation, Mindszenty inquired about the Sisters of the Redeemer, whom he had known since 1944, since he and his fellow priests had stayed in the motherhouse in Sopron under house arrest imposed by the Arrow Cross regime. Lányi responded as follows: "I told him that many of the former nuns of the order had married, naturally having been released from their vows by the Holy See. Mindszenty replied that the fact that some of the nuns had married was still less of a problem than the fact that there were peace priests [i.e., collaborators] in the country." *ÁBTL-3.1.9. V-145725/74*.

²Mária Elma Ribai (Mitterpullendorf, Austria, 1914 – Piliscsaba, 2008), a member of the Order of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer. Her original name was Ilona Ribarits. She taught in the order's school of commerce in Sopron before the order was dispersed. From the autumn of 1950, she was employed by a parish in Sopron, and two years later in Győr. From 1958, she held a secretarial position in Püspökvár (Győr). In the 1960s, she was under the surveillance of the state security service. During the underground years, she was observed to work actively among the other members of the order and was described as a leading figure. After the regime change, she worked actively for the reorganization of the order's monastic life. She systematized the congregation's documents, established the order's archives, and published several studies on the history of the order. Two works by her — the history of the order itself and the history of the order's schools — have been preserved in manuscript form and provide excellent source material.



began to correspond with other sisters from the order, asking them to write down their memories, primarily of the dispersion but also about the circumstances of their initial vocation, the older sisters who taught them, the internment itself, and their years in hiding. Although the letters cover a variety of topics, most of them focus on the experience of internment and dispersion and the subsequent harassment. Alongside the description of specific events, the letters reveal the psychological pressure on the sisters, their fear, and the constant expectation of new ordeals. At the same time, the letters convey their profound faith, their trust in Providence, and their commitment to the order. No doubt according to the concept of Mária Elma Ribai, who initiated the correspondence, most of the questions targeted the period of hardships; this was the period for which most data were needed, since there was little source material available for the history of the order when it came to events after the 1950s. Her description essentially draws on these reports. However, since she was also keen to summarize the spirit and character of the community in individual chapters, some of the respondents also referred to their formation within the community, their superiors, or indeed their original vocation. The extent to which the accounts provided by around 50 respondents can be regarded as representative remains open to question. The requests were sent to those women who had remained faithful to their monastic vows, but not to those who had left their vocation. Nor does the completed history of the congregation itself address the issue of those women who left the order. Thus, only around one-seventh of the 360 sisters who experienced the new beginnings of the change of political regime were contacted by letter, which is not a particularly high proportion. The sisters who were contacted were no doubt part of Sister Elma's own circle of acquaintances within the order, which also constituted a kind of filter. The respondents typically wrote one or two pages, although their answers did not always contain specific details, and a great deal of space was occasionally devoted to the emotional and spiritual aspects of the experienced events. The source material, which refers for the most part to events in the 1950s and 1960s, is nevertheless very rich and its value is indisputable, although the events and processes, as seen from the perspective of individuals looking back to the past, need to be handled appropriately.³ The summarized history of the order, which was ultimately completed but which has remained in manuscript form, is an excellent source and on the whole contributes to our understanding of the history of this large congregation.

In addition to the rich source material, the state security reports provide valuable data that help to refine the picture. The order of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer attracted the attention of the state security because of its large membership, among other things. There is extensive archival material on the order, and the present paper relies on material from two operational folders and one investigative folder. One of the operational folders contains documents relating to Márta Flettner, who was mother superior in 1948, and the other is a file labelled "Redeemers," which essentially contains information on the leading members of the community, their network of contacts, and their underground activities. The investigative file contains the minutes of legal proceedings against the canon of Győr, János Lányi, which can be associated with the order, since several of the accused were Sisters of the Redeemer.

³There is a wealth of literature available on the subject of remembrance. See, among others, the work of András Keszei (KESZEI 2010:5–34, 2015).



The findings of Zsuzsanna Bögre (BÖGRE – SZABÓ 2010:1–18; BÖGRE 2020:3–19, 2021:39–54), a sociologist who studied the fate of women’s religious communities in Hungary in the second half of the twentieth century, likewise analyzing their traumas and survival strategies, make an enormous contribution to our understanding of this issue.⁴ These sources are complemented by data from historical research, which, when properly contextualized, provides a more accurate understanding of this specific period in the history of monasticism in Hungary. Besides the above, fieldwork carried out in 2022 in Mezőkövesd, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, was also significant. A women’s religious community of similar importance to the Sopron motherhouse was established here between the two world wars, as also confirmed by the richly detailed sources on the history of the order in relation to this settlement. The state security reports mentioned earlier also drew attention to this settlement, since, in the late 1960s, a special concept was developed to disperse the group of around 30 sisters who had remained in the settlement and who were leading civilian lives.⁵ During the fieldwork, the researchers even managed to interview people who had been taught by the sisters, both at the convent school and later privately. Several of the interviewees talked about how they saw the sisters during the period of dispersion and tried to describe their peculiar mentality. Since vocations emerged within many of the extended families in the settlement, it is still possible to come across interviewees whose families include “Sisters of the Redeemer.” Their recollections have also brought us closer to an understanding of the sisters’ lives. To date, six people from the town have been interviewed on this theme.

The research relies primarily on the available sources, thus it focuses on those sisters who kept their vocation after the order was dispersed. The research is limited to the currently available resources, although further goals include exploring data on those who left the community. The central characters in the present study are the “faithful” who continued as members of the community despite the hardships, although it cannot be claimed with any certainty that they were in the majority: for the time being, this remains an assumption.

⁴I would like to take this opportunity to thank Zsuzsanna Bögre for her extremely helpful advice during the writing of the present study.

⁵ÁBTL – 3.1.5 O-13140 101. The number given in the 1968 state security report seems to be decidedly high. Further research is needed to clarify the figure. According to the sisters’ chronicle, 17 Sisters of the Redeemer were working in the convent school in Mezőkövesd in 1947. In early 1950, the year the order was dispersed, a total of 13 sisters were living in the so-called Kulcsár House, which had by then been assigned to them. In the summer, on the orders of the superior general, several of them left the community, and eventually four sisters remained in the house, three of whom had been born in Mezőkövesd. During the internment, 37 Sisters of the Redeemer arrived here, as well as 12 or 13 sisters from Szombathely, who, according to the Mezőkövesd chronicle, were Dominican nuns. The majority of the sisters left the internment camp within a few days, thus it is most likely that the sisters who had been born in Mezőkövesd remained in the settlement, together with four Dominican nuns, also according to the chronicle. The high number mentioned in the state security report, although it referred specifically to the Sisters of the Redeemer, might conceivably represent the combined number of nuns from several different orders. In the course of the fieldwork, it turned out that members of the former local Jesuit community of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus had also remained in the town, mostly selling devotional items. As yet, we have no accurate data concerning the number of Sisters of the Redeemer living in Mezőkövesd after the order was dispersed, but it is certain that locally born sisters from other convents of the order may have returned to their families. In the summary of the report, the settlement is described as “a focal point of Church affairs,” and the total number of religious living there is estimated at almost 70. ÁBTL – 3.1.5 O-13140 106.



THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

The order of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer settled in Hungary in the second half of the nineteenth century and was one of the largest⁶ women's monastic orders in the country before it was dispersed. The order was founded in 1849 by Elisabeth Eppinger in Niederbronn, a town near Strasbourg, in Alsace-Lorraine.⁷ The first child born to a large farming family, she showed a deep emotional intelligence and religious commitment from an early age. As a young adult, she was often left bedridden by illness but considered this to be a way of sharing in Christ's suffering. She recounted her visions to the parish priest, David Reichard, who took his spiritual child's stories seriously and supported her unflinchingly, including in the founding of the order. Pilgrims came from the surrounding area to visit Elisabeth Eppinger, the "visionary of Niederbronn," who founded the new order with her companions, following her recovery. Like other communities, the congregation was increasingly sensitive to the social problems caused by the industrialization that had gained momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mother Alphonse, as she became known as the head of the order, understood that, in the families of industrial workers, the sick could not be cared for by their relatives. The sisters were able to fill a huge gap in terms of healthcare, which was underdeveloped and, in many places, non-existent at that time, acting in the Christian spirit by visiting patients who needed to be cared for in their families. Their help during the cholera epidemic of 1854 further increased their recognition among the inhabitants of the region.⁸ In 1857, the sisters of the order reached Vienna, where they were entrusted with the care of orphaned children. From there, they were invited to nearby Sopron⁹ by Bishop János Simor¹⁰ in 1863, and within a few years they were caring for over a hundred children in the city.¹¹ In little more than a decade, membership

⁶With respect to the number of the Sisters of the Redeemer, we have divergent data for the year 1948. According to Sister Mária Elma Ribai, the chronicler of the order, whose manuscript summary of the history of the order — which draws on an article published in the journal *Új Ember* based on data found in the Archives of the Primate of Esztergom for this period — states that the order numbered 1,151 sisters in 1948, it was the second largest women's order in Hungary. They were outnumbered only by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, with 1,470 members. Quoted by NÉMETH 1992:50. Margit Balogh and Jenő Gergely also refer to the Sisters of the Redeemer as the second largest monastic order in 1948, with 1,078 members, while according to their data they were outnumbered by the Kalocsa congregation of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame, with 1,331 members (BALOGH – GERGELY 1996:198). In the records of the archives of the order relating to the 1940s, the data for 1947–1948 contain the names of 1,122 sisters, 1,069 of whom had taken full vows and 53 of whom were novices (IMNNL box 22, item 145).

⁷For the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer and its founder, Elisabeth Eppinger, see also IMNNL box 2, book 2; book 3; no details; item 27 IMNNL box 3/a, item 13/b; book 21, IMNNL no details. RIBAI 1991; RIBAI 1994, 1998; PFLÉGER 1921, 1923; NÍGG 1973; NAGEL 1989; SOLDER VON GÜLDENSTUBBE 2009, 2017.

⁸IMNNL no details, RIBAI 1994:16.

⁹A town in western Hungary, near the Austrian border. Its population in the 1860s was around 22,000. It has a significant German population (51% according to the 1910 census) with 44.3% Hungarians and other nationalities.

¹⁰János Simor (Székesfehérvár, 1813 – Esztergom, 1891) was a prince primate, archbishop, and cardinal. He was the county bishop of Győr from 1857 and archbishop of Esztergom from 1867. In: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/S/Simor.html>. (accessed November 12, 2022) Letter confirming the settlement of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer: IMNNL box 1, item 1.

¹¹According to the summary of the history of the order by Sister Mária Mechtildis Rajczy, the founding mother Alphonse Marie Eppinger met 16 sisters and 96 pupils during her visit to Sopron in 1863. IMNNL box 3/a, item 13/b. Sister Mária Basilissa Gürtler mentions 102 children in a letter dated February 8, 1865. IMNNL box 37, item 22.



of the congregation had reached almost 700, and within a few years the care and education of children was becoming an increasingly important area of their activities in Hungary. Bishop of Győr János Simor issued a letter confirming the sisters' establishment in Sopron in 1863.¹² The bishop of Győr envisioned the development of the women's community, and a solution to the issue of attracting new members, as lying in gradual independence from the motherhouse; besides, he presumably wished to have near him a women's congregation that was subordinate not to the head of the order but to the head of the diocese — in other words, to him. Following the example of the sisters in Vienna, who had broken away from the motherhouse in accordance with the decree of Cardinal Rauscher¹³ of Vienna, in 1867 Simor also declared the Sopron house to be independent from Niederbronn.¹⁴ The rule of the sisters who had broken away from the motherhouse came into force once it had been approved by János Zalka,¹⁵ the new bishop of Győr.¹⁶ From the 1870s onwards, the work of the Sisters of the Redeemer gradually took root in Sopron and the surrounding area. More and more branch houses were established, where children were taught and cared for. In addition, the sisters naturally cared for the sick in the hospitals and poorhouses, although the teaching and education of children was gradually given priority. The explanation for this lies in the 1868 law on public schools,¹⁷ which opened a new chapter in the history of education in Hungary. Nuns were often called upon to run public elementary schools. Appreciative of every invitation and opportunity, in most cases the relatively new religious order endeavored to send a sister to settlements where the local parish priest, the community leaders, or a well-intentioned donor typically took steps to establish an elementary school or kindergarten. The Sisters of the Redeemer gradually became active and respected members of the local communities, mainly in Transdanubia and Upper Hungary (now Slovakia), although they were also present in the eastern region of the country and in the

¹²Founding charter of János Simor, Bishop of Győr, 1863. [IMNNL box 1, item 1](#). The Sisters of the Redeemer who settled there were even given assistance by Countess Emília Zichy, wife of Pál Széchenyi. Initially, the countess provided the most essential furnishings and clothing for the four sisters who settled in Új Street, Sopron. During her frequent visits, she tried to provide both the sisters and the children with clothes and gifts. [IMNNL box 3/a, item 13/b](#).

¹³Joseph Othmar von Rauscher (Vienna, 1797 – Vienna, 1875), archbishop of the Archdiocese of Vienna from 1853 until his death.

¹⁴In his letter of June 13, 1867, already in his capacity as Archbishop of Esztergom, János Simor justifies the need for independence as follows: “Since it has become apparent that there were no candidates for the Congregation of the Daughters of the Most Holy Redeemer in Hungary who would be able to complete the novitiate in the diocese of Strasbourg, and still less was there the necessary funding for this purpose, and since the Sopron house, as a daughter house of the Niederbronn house, could not assume any additional burden for the benefit of the motherhouse, and finally, in order that the Sopron house should not lack sisters who know and speak the Hungarian language, in 1866 we severed all ties between the houses of Niederbronn and Sopron; we declared the latter independent of the motherhouse and all other houses of the congregation, and we place it under our own jurisdiction.” [IMNNL box 1, item 2](#).

¹⁵Having completed his studies in Nagyszombat, János Zalka, Bishop of Győr (Veszékény, Sopron County, 1820 – Győr, 1901), became a student at the Pázmáneum, a seminary in Vienna. He was professor of Church history at the Faculty of Theology in Pest, and from 1867 until his death he was county bishop of Győr. <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/Z/Zalka.html> (accessed November 12, 2022).

¹⁶[IMNNL box 1, item 16](#).

¹⁷József Eötvös, minister of religion and public education in the Andrassy Government between 1867 and 1871, submitted a bill to the Hungarian Parliament on June 23, 1868, which was approved by the emperor on December 5 of the same year. This law was significant in that it obliged parents to send their children to school between the ages of six and 12 or face being fined, hence general compulsory school attendance in Hungary came into force.



southern territories (now Serbia).¹⁸ Besides educating children, they also continued to provide nursing care for the sick, although this activity became somewhat less pronounced. The changes in national borders imposed by the peace treaties at the end of the First World War required the creation of new novitiates and provincial centers (RIBAI 1997:185).¹⁹ As a result of the Sopron plebiscite, there was no need for the relocation of the motherhouse,²⁰ while the purchase of real estate led to a considerable increase in the sisters' finances. However, it was mainly the human resources of the continuously expanding community of sisters that enabled their institutions in Sopron and Buda to take their place among the most prestigious educational institutions for girls in post-Trianon Hungary, while the sisters were also frequently called upon to serve in state hospitals. The dynamic growth that typified the community of sisters from the 1920s onwards was owing to many different factors. Its established network of contacts, prudent leadership, and true sense of vocation made the order successful and attractive to young girls.²¹ In the spirit of the times, the Catholic Church also welcomed the development of religious communities, including the establishment of women's religious communities. Significantly, one of the order's most prominent patrons was Kunó Klebelsberg, member of parliament for Sopron and subsequently minister of religion and public education (RIBAI 1997:183).²² Klebelsberg always

¹⁸The Sisters of the Redeemer were known to have worked in the following settlements before 1945: Boldogasszony-Frauenkirchen, Féltorony-Halbturm, Kismarton-Eisenstadt, Léka-Lockenhaus Miklósfalva-Nickelsdorf, Németkeresztúr-Deutschkreuz, Nezsider-Neusiedl am See, Répceköhalom-Steinberg Rohonc-Rechnitz (Austria); Csorna, Écs, Fertőrákos, Győr, Győr-Szabadhegy, Győr-Újváros, Győr-Nádorváros, Kajár, Kapuvár, Mosonszentjános, Mosonszentpéter, Moszonszolnok, Nagycenk, Rábapordány, Rajka, Sopron, Süttör, Szany, Szil (Győr-Moson-Sopron County); Ács, Komárom, Tata-Tóváros (Komárom-Esztergom County); Agyagosszergény, Csepreg, Sárvár (Vas County); Letenye, Nagykapornak, Zalaegerszeg (Zala County); Ercsi, Mór, Martonvásár (Fejér County); Szekszárd, Zomba (Tolna County); Szigetvár (Baranya County); Budapest, Budakeszi, Csepel Pestszenterzsebet, Vác, Vecsés, Vecsés-Andrássytelep (Pest County); Hort (Heves County); Boldogkőváralja, Mezőkövesd, Szentistván, Szikszó, Ózd (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén); Gava (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County); Jászárokszállás, Kenderes, Tiszafüred, Újszász, Szajol, Szolnok (Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County); Püspökladány (Hajdú-Bihar County); Baja (Bács-Kiskun County); Csongrád, Szeged, Szentes (Csongrád-Csanád County); Bártfa-Bardejov, Besztercebánya-Banská Bystrica, Dobsina-Dobšiná, Eperjes-Prešov, Érsekújvár-Nové Zámky Kassa-Košice, Naszvad-Nesvad, Oroszvár-Rusovce, Rozsnyó-Rožňava, Tardoskedd-Tvrdoševce (Slovakia); Magyarakanizsa-Kanjiza, Subotica-Subotica, Novi Sad-Novi Sad, Zenta-Senta (Serbia).

¹⁹See also IMNNL box 1, item 12. The establishment of provinces. Letters from Rome forwarded by Bishop Antal Fetszer of Győr, authorizing the establishment of the requested provinces. "Erigendae Provinciae essent: 1. Provincia Hungarica, cum Residentia Superioris Generalis in domo-principi in Sopron; 2. Provincia Austriaca, cum residentia Provincialis in Oberberg-Eisenstadt (Kismartonhegy); 3. Provincia Cechoslovaciaca, cum residentia Superioris Provincialis in Novi-Zamky (Érsekújvár), 4. Provincia Jugoslavica, cum residentia Superioris Provincialis in Subotica (Szabadka); 5. Provincia Americana, cum residentia Superioris Provincialis in McKeesport." February 28, 1924.

²⁰In accordance with the plebiscite held between December 14 and 16, 1921, Sopron and its surroundings remained part of Hungary.

²¹In the settlements where the Sisters of the Redeemer were active, a large number of girls chose to become nuns. "Of all the settlements in which the congregation was present, the beautiful convent of Süttör and its attractive, homely feel encouraged the highest number of vocations, with a round 100 being sent to the motherhouse in Sopron." IMNNL, no details, RIBAI 1994:126.

²²Kunó Klebelsberg (Magyarpécska, 1875 – Budapest, 1932) was minister of religion and public education between 1922 and 1931. His ministry was responsible for the construction of folk schools in farming settlements, the reform of public higher elementary schools and girls' high schools, as well as the establishment of Hungarian institutes in Vienna, Berlin, and Rome. During his tenure, a significant part of the state budget was allocated to the development of education and scientific research.



maintained a cordial relationship with the sisters²³ and actively contributed to the order being entrusted with the management of several schools, while he also greatly appreciated the fact that the sisters were engaged with people outside the convent walls. He provided generous support²⁴ from the Catholic Religious Fund for the construction of the Szent József Institute in Sopron and encouraged the sisters to establish the Szent Margit's Girls' High School in Buda. The latter school was established in 1920, and the new neo-baroque building was inaugurated in October 1932, becoming one of the most important bases for the modern education of girls in Budapest alongside the school in Váci Street run by the Congregation of Jesus, the Sophianum Institute run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and the Patrona Hungariae High School for Girls run by the Daughters of Divine Charity. The financial resources needed for this monumental institute were provided through the selfless work and sacrifices of a community of women whose numbers approached one thousand.²⁵ The order flourished between the two world wars. They were present in society as both teachers and nurses, and the network they developed was rocked by the horrors of the Second World War and the changes that followed.

THE ADVANCING BATTLEFRONT

By the mid-1940s, the order was steadily developing institutions in several towns and villages and had a substantial community of sisters, and it enjoyed the support not only of Church leaders but often also of the local population. The sisters maintained an active relationship with the adult community through their “popular educational” activities and were particularly concerned with supporting the poorer members of agrarian and industrial society. The close relationships and strong bonds they developed over the years with members of all generations also meant that they stood by those who relied on their support as the

²³“I have given a great deal of thought,” wrote Mother Bonaventura to Klebelsberg on February 14, 1927, “to how I can most worthily express my gratitude to Your Excellency now, in the future, and for eternity. By the inspiration of the Sacred Heart, I have decided that, in memory of the happy day, in memory of Your Excellency and your dear Wife, I will establish a perpetual chantry foundation in our Church, and in its sacristy a plaque will proclaim to posterity the noble heart of Your Excellency towards our congregation.” *IMNNL box 23, item 153*.

²⁴Klebelsberg lodged with them; he presented Mother Bonaventura with her award in person; he found a place for them near his villa in Budakeszi; the sisters accompanied his coffin at his funeral; and they always commemorated his death. “I ask the dear Sisters to kindly say tomorrow's Holy Mass and Holy Communion for His Excellency Count Klebelsberg and Her Excellency Lady Klebelsberg, as today is the anniversary of the donation of 3 billion (P 240,000) for our Szent József Institute. In exchange for this, and the 2 billion (P 160,000) already donated, making a total of 5 billion (P 400,000), we have promised to say Holy Mass for our benefactors on February 10 each year, for as long as our Congregation exists. Sopron, February 9, 1927.” *IMNNL box 23, item 153*.

²⁵When the institute was established, construction began with taking out a loan of 900,000 Dutch guilders, the repayment of which was intended to be completed by 1955 at the latest. *IMNNL box 20/b item 130* – Deed for the Dutch loan. However, the repayment was completed earlier, thus the communist state took over the school building free of state debt in 1948.



battlefront approached.²⁶ The community of sisters was not spared the ordeals of the Second World War. Their institutions and schools suffered severe damage in the bombings and as the battlefront advanced. Some of the larger institutions were converted into war hospitals or bomb shelters,²⁷ while others were seized as German, then Soviet military headquarters.

The German invasion of Hungary saw the beginning of the ghettoization of the Jews and their subsequent deportation to concentration camps. It is well known that members of monastic communities were involved in rescuing Jews, and countless Jewish lives were saved as a result of the rescue missions coordinated by the Jesuit Fr. Raile,²⁸ among others. The College of Szent Anna, run by the Sisters of the Redeemer, is still located to this day next to the Jesuit monastery in Horánszky Street, Budapest, while the order's Collegium Marianum,²⁹ which functioned as student accommodation and as a home for single Christian women prior to the war, was located in the next side street. According to reports, both these houses were used to hide Jews, often exposing the residents to harassment and humiliation. Angelo Rotta³⁰ himself requested the sisters to shelter Jews in the building of the Collegium Marianum. With Hungarian refugees from Poland and Transylvania, along with the sheltered Jews, the population of the student hostel reached around 360. The recollections also describe how, on several occasions,

²⁶The vicissitudes of the war are accurately described in the chronicles of each house. In the entry for September 26, 1944, the chronicle of the Mezőkövesd house reads: "A letter has been received from the Venerable Mother, requesting that civilian clothes be made for everyone. The furniture and other equipment from the house will be delivered to trusted families." During the month of October, groups of German and Hungarian soldiers occupied the convent school in Mezőkövesd in turn. Efforts were made to rescue the sisters' belongings from the house, but the school equipment owned by the village fell prey to the Russian troops. Three Mezőkövesd-born sisters remained in the village, which was occupied by the Russians on November 11. "The Russians came along Szentistván Road and through the cemetery garden with indescribably wild roaring, like beasts. This was the start of permanent terror among the population and the hiding of the women. Murder, robbery, and abductions were part of the daily routine. Forced labor and fear were constant in the town. The sisters also had to go to the convent to do forced labor...Sisters who had sought refuge with their parents taught wearing civilian clothing, only donning their habits at Easter." The Russians left the convent school on April 7, 1945, leaving it in a terrible condition. The house chronicle records in detail the losses and material damage to the school, estimating the total value at 287,996 pengős, and the material damage incurred to the congregation at 279,875 pengős. *IMNNL* box 32, item 46.

²⁷*IMNNL* no details. *RIBAI* 1991:36; *SZÁLKA* 1991:191.

²⁸Jakab Raile, SJ (Vaskút, 1894 – Newark, 1949) was a Jesuit monk who joined the Jesuit order in 1912. Between the two world wars he worked in Vienna and the United States. He served first in Szeged and then in Budapest. During the Second World War he helped many who were persecuted, for which he was posthumously honored with the Yad Vashem award in Jerusalem in 1992. <https://jezsuita.hu/a-magyar-jezsuitak-budapesti-embermentevetenyege-1944-1945-ben/> (accessed November 12, 2022)

²⁹The institute was founded in 1905 at the initiative of Mrs Pál Ruffly. This "lady of great social virtue," as Mária Elma Ribai described her, wished to create a home for elderly Catholic women and young girls who had moved to the capital. Soon after taking over the institution, the order founded the Collegium Marianum Catholic Ladies' and Female College Students' Residence Association, subsequently moving to 11 József Street (now Gyula Krúdy Street). *RIBAI* 1994:137. <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/C/Collegium%20Marianum.html> (accessed June 16, 2022).

³⁰Angelo Rotta (Milan, 1972 – Rome, 1965). Papal nuncio in Budapest from 1930 and one of the most important leaders of the diplomatic actions to save Jewish lives in 1944. He informed the Vatican in detail about the Jewish policy in Hungary and issued thousands of letters of protection from the Vatican for Jewish people. On April 4, 1945, he was expelled from Hungary on the insistence of the Soviets. See also *BEKE* 2014:181–187.



the life of Sister Viralda³¹ of the Sisters of the Redeemer was endangered. The sister recalls how she cooperated with the Jesuit Fr. Jánosi³² in trying to help any Jews who knocked on their door. According to her account, due to a lack of space a pregnant Jewish woman was sent to Fr. Jánosi at the house of the Holy Cross Association at 11 Múzeum Boulevard, as no one was aware that the house had been taken over by the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross Party. Based on a telephone conversation that took place in the meantime, Sister Viralda realized that they could all be in danger. She sent university students after the woman, then she herself went with a young woman to the Holy Cross house. The reception was obvious: “Scarcely had we reached the first floor, and that particular office, my God, it was full of Arrow Cross soldiers. There must have been 10 or 15 of them. They were sitting on a table. Brother János, the very same, said: ‘Sister Viralda? You’ve the face of a novice but you’ve a great deal to answer for!’ He asked me why I’d come. Was it to save Jewish property? I said no. ‘For jewelry?’ ‘No. I’m looking for a young woman.’”³³ Rather than being allowed home, the women were detained for the whole day. Like the others being held, they were not allowed to go down to the shelter during the bomb raids. At around 5 p.m., after lengthy interrogations, they were released, but the sisters had already given up hope of them returning home safely. In the following weeks, Arrow Cross soldiers broke into the house several times, searching for Jews. On one occasion, Sister Viralda telephoned the Swedish Embassy to ask for help. “And then Wallenberg³⁴ turned up with his secretary, and the Arrow Cross men scurried away like beaten dogs, just muttering at me that it was a shame and a disgrace how the Church opposed the government. Wallenberg had referred to the agreement between the Swedish and Hungarian governments; the Arrow Cross men said they knew

³¹Sister Mária Anna Viralda Groszeibl (Mór, 1913 – Mór, 1988). After leaving elementary school, the sisters suggested she attend the school of commerce in Sopron. Having taken her vows, she became a supervisor in rural boarding schools. In 1940, she was appointed deputy prefect of the Collegium Marianum in Budapest, and in 1941 she became the sole supervisor of over 100 students. In the most difficult situations, such as those concerning Jewish people and refugees, she showed heroic courage. At the beginning of October 1944, the papal nuncio Angelo Rotta summoned the superior of the college to the Nunciature, and she sent Sister Viralda. She was asked to take in 100 persecuted Jews. On October 11, the rescue was already under way. Sister Viralda’s telephone calls were answered sometimes by the Jesuit priests, sometimes by Wallenberg himself. The Collegium sheltered a total of 150 persecuted Jews for longer or shorter periods of time. At the time of the deportation, she was sent to Mezőkövesd. From there she moved to her parents’ home. She took her superior, Sister Albina, with her and looked after her to the end. To support herself, she worked first at a nearby mine and then as an administrator at the hospital in Mór until her retirement. “We believe that Our Lady, the Queen of May, opens the gates of heaven to those who have so often put themselves in danger to save others.” *IMNNL box 50, item 241, 277.*

³²Fr. József Jánosi SJ (1898–1965), Jesuit monk, philosopher, and university professor. In the first half of the 1940s, he was the ecclesiastical president of the Hungarian Holy Cross Association for the protection and assistance of Catholics of Jewish origin. From the autumn of 1944, in collaboration with the Good Shepherd Committee, the Swedish Red Cross, and Angelo Rotta, he helped the persecuted by issuing free passes. On the life-saving activity of the Jesuits, see *BIKFA LVI 2016.*

³³*IMNNL box 12, item 84, 3–4.*

³⁴Raoul Wallenberg (Stockholm, 1912 – ?, 1947) was a Swedish diplomat and a prominent figure in the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. An architect by training, he was sent to Hungary by the neutral Swedish Government at the request of the War Refugee Board, a US Government body set up to rescue European Jews. The diplomat, who arrived in Hungary in the summer of 1944, established a strong network that made him a leading figure in the field of diplomatic rescue. He was captured by the Soviets in the winter of 1945 and taken to Moscow. The circumstances of his death remain unclear to this day. He supposedly died in 1947 of a heart attack, according to Soviet reports. http://www.holokausztmagyarorszag.hu/index.php?section=1&type=content&chapter=14_4_2 (accessed June 17, 2022)



nothing about it, but they accepted Wallenberg's resolute intervention. Once they'd left, Wallenberg commented that the Arrow Cross men had apparently been wanting to score some points for themselves, which is why they'd come."³⁵ Sister Viralda also asked for the help of the Jesuit fathers when drunken SS soldiers broke into the building. According to her recollections, this happened in December 1944, when the sisters were keeping a constant vigil amidst the incessant bombardments. Some drunk SS soldiers broke into the building looking for Jews. As she led the soldiers to the shelter where the wounded were being accommodated, Sister Viralda courageously sent a message to the hidden Jews, telling them to move to the upper floors of the building. When the soldiers reached the shelter, they immediately got the wounded people they found there to recite the creed and the Lord's Prayer, to identify which of them were Jews. At this point, the sister thought to send for Fr. Raile, with whose help the cursing, drunken, violent soldiers were sent away with great difficulty. "Before long Fr. Raile arrived, asking 'Who gave you orders to disturb the sisters at night?' He said he didn't believe that the order had come from the SS commander, because the two of them were good friends and had been talking until midnight, and he had made no mention of giving such an order. Well, they didn't say anything. They talked for a while. All of a sudden, Father Raile said: 'You know what? You should escort me home. There's a curfew and I don't dare be out in the street on my own.'"³⁶

Jews were concealed in the order's other institutions, too. Sister Mária Archangela Flettner³⁷ asked several branch houses for details of these rescue missions. According to Sister Mária Edit Eszterle, the family of a Jewish stocking manufacturer was hidden in Szent Margit's High School, since the daughter, Mária Flamm,³⁸ was a student there. "She and her mother stayed with us in one of the rooms in the bishop's suite;³⁹ they hid there for a year, and they survived."⁴⁰ In the region of Upper Hungary (now Slovakia), rescue efforts also took place in Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky), the most important town for the Sisters of the Redeemer. The Flenger and Szent

³⁵IMNNL box 12, item 84.

³⁶IMNNL box 12, item 84, 7–8.

³⁷Sister Mária Márta Archangela Flettner (Szekszárd, 1899 – Piliscsaba, 1983) was one of four children and came from a family of civil servants. Her parents also intended her to become a civil servant. Having obtained a degree from the Academy of Music, she taught at the Order's Szent Margit High School in Buda. From 1943, she was general caretaker in Sopron. In 1947, she visited the American province with Mother Mária Berchmana Berghofer, and in May 1948 she was elected superior general in Sopron. The nationalization of Church schools and the dismissal of nursing sisters, as well as the revocation of monastic operating licenses took place during her tenure. During the internment, at the time of the so-called settlement negotiations, she was declared a free principal superior and visited her fellow nuns who were crowded into internment camps or who were sick in hospital or at home. She visited the Fót camp for the last time on September 11, 1950. Following the long period of vicissitude after the order was dispersed, she found a home in Pilisliget and took up a post as cantor in the local Church. Her daily life was made difficult by illness and by constant harassment by the authorities. In the words of the parish priest Béla Zsolnay: "*She was the unbroken and irrepressible spirit of the surviving convent and the closed convent.*" IMNNL box 50, item 241, 219.

³⁸In the 1944/45 academic year, Mária Flamm was indeed a grade 6 pupil at the high school, from which she graduated with excellent results, as attested by the school yearbook. According to the yearbooks, she began her studies in the 1940/41 academic year and graduated from the order's school in Buda in the 1946/47 academic year. *Iskolai értesítő* 1947:24, 92.

³⁹A so-called bishop's suite was set up in the school building, where Bishop Vilmos Apor lodged on the occasion of episcopal conferences or other trips to Budapest (RIBAI 1999:182).

⁴⁰IMNNL box 12, item 84, 15.



Katalin High Schools were located inside the ghetto designated by the Germans, and they provided food and medicine to those in need until they were transported to the local brickworks. The recollections testify that, whenever the sisters had the opportunity, they endeavored to help suffering Jews, or took in refugees and cared for them. It is unclear, of course, how many times they had to turn down requests for help, but it can be assumed that help was provided whenever possible. The bomb raids and the intensifying pressures of the war traumatized the whole of society, although the approaching front, and the suspected violence of the Soviet soldiers in particular, caused even greater fear among the sisters. The order's houses reacted in different ways to the approaching front. The sisters from the branch houses left the settlements and fled either to the larger houses, or to the motherhouse. Some managed to reach Sopron, while others were caught by the advancing battlefront in one of the settlements along the way. On the whole, they tried to stay put and get through the most difficult times where they were.

In the case of Mezőkövesd, we have evidence that the sisters stopped wearing their nun's habits and returned to their families dressed in civilian clothes in an attempt to survive as the battlefront approached. However, excerpts from some sources suggest that this approach did not offer the necessary protection;⁴¹ indeed, elsewhere the sisters were called on to wear their habits and remain together. One extant letter confirms this. "Dearest little Sister, believe me, it was our habits alone that afforded us protection, since everything we hear about them is true. My God, the young in particular had to endure and suffer days of horror. The convent was protected by Our Lady. Thank God, the convent suffered nothing but material damage... There was appalling destruction and torture during those three days of looting. In the space of those three days, 130 people died in the vineyards, and I don't know exactly how many in the town. Young and old alike were among the dead. Nine pigs, a huge amount of corn and all the poultry were taken from our villa. Nothing was left but the bare walls, and even those weren't intact, although two of our dear sisters were out there. Nothing can be done at times like these. Those days belonged to the looters. One of them had 14 watches... As for the future, the most important thing is that we all stay together and wear our habits, because this will protect us, at least morally. You must wear civilian clothes and underwear beneath your habit without fail, since you may be left with nothing but what you're wearing. That's how I dressed for 10 days. They have sufficient respect for priests and religious that when they sent everyone out to dig, without exception (women between the ages of 18 and 50, and men up to the age of 60), they sent us and the monks back home again. Another important thing is that if the (...) do arrive, they must be received without fail by the elderly. Those sisters who went home to their parents also took refuge with us after appalling torture.⁴² So, the most important thing is to stay together!!... Dear Sister! ... The Good Lord has afforded us wondrous protection during this one month. I have never before experienced God's special love as much as during these difficult days. As for what might happen in the future, I can only say: 1. You must without fail remain inside the convent and continue to wear

⁴¹"The Daughters of the People (Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded in Hungary in 1921 by Father Ferenc Biró SJ) suffered huge losses. All their Church paraphernalia were stolen. They mostly fled here to us. The other sisters are also in hiding, having removed their habits on the orders of their incompetent adviser." *JTMRL - II* .6. 248. The entry for November 18, 1944, in the *Historia Domus* of the Mezőkövesd Jesuits confirms the information contained in the chronicle of the Mezőkövesd house of the Sisters of the Redeemer, according to which some of them stopped wearing their habits as the front approached.

⁴²In all probability, this refers to the rape of these women.



your habits. 2. Always stay together. Do not reveal where the shelter is. 3. Be extremely reserved, not kind. 4. Only the older sisters should show themselves before the occupying troops. Here, all the women hid, and if they had to show themselves, all of them acted slovenly and short-tempered.”⁴³ The quoted letter attests to the available means and opportunities for surviving and avoiding assault. According to this account, the Soviet soldiers were restrained by the nuns’ habits and the protection of the community,⁴⁴ as they still had a certain respect for members of the Church, despite the fierce anti-ecclesiastical Bolshevik ideology and propaganda. However, references in some of the sources suggest that there probably were instances of rape,⁴⁵ although no clear evidence⁴⁶ of this has been found in the case of the Sisters of the Redeemer, which does not of course prove that it did not happen.

AFTER THE WAR – THE FIRST ATTACKS BY THE DICTATORSHIP

After the war, the sisters set about their work with enormous enthusiasm and hope. They were able to work in relative peace until 1948, the year of the communist takeover. Superior General Sister Archangela recalled the year 1948 as follows: “The persecution of the churches now became public.”⁴⁷ The Catholic Church had already faced severe hardships in the preceding years, having been deprived of real financial security and economic strength by the liquidation of its large estates during the land redistribution in 1945. The ban on Catholic associations in 1946 then made it clear that there was no place for organized religious communities in the newly emerging social order. One might also mention here, as further examples of the growing attacks

⁴³IMNNL box 32, item 199/3, 1–2.

⁴⁴The protective power of the community could be felt not only in the world of the Church but also in the civilian world. “Gathered together, neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances were, even if not always, more likely to protect women from violence.” (PETŐ 2018:64).

⁴⁵The chronicle of the Mosonszolnok house describes the violence of the newly arrived Soviet soldiers as follows: “Suddenly, one of them grasped Sister Admirabilis. I went to help her, but then he got hold of me. We wrestled and I won. I ran after the sisters to the rectory, even without my veil. Sister Ambrose yelled loudly and hit him so hard on the head that he could scarcely walk. Gerasima dragged him off to the rectory.” IMNNL box 32, item 48. We can therefore assume that nuns were raped in Hungary, even if not in large numbers, just as they were in neighboring Poland. For the story of the Polish nuns, see KARWOWSKA 2011:163–171.

⁴⁶On January 6, 1945, the Jesuit Fr. Michael Legeza gave a lecture to the sisters in the motherhouse in Sopron. Father Legeza tried to reassure the frightened sisters and give them advice with respect to the approaching front. As to whether or not the sisters should leave the house because of the impending danger, he preferred not to make any suggestions, leaving it to their conscience. Regarding the soldiers’ aggression, he stated: “With respect to chastity, your concerns are valid although there is no need to be too afraid. If anything happens as a result of violence, the Lord will acknowledge it as martyrdom.” IMNNL box 32, item 199/1, 4. According to the chronicle, soon afterwards István Berkesi, a theology teacher at the Sion Institute in Budapest, informed the sisters that ecclesiastical personnel were not being harassed anywhere. “A certificate had been issued stating in Russian and Hungarian that ecclesiastical personnel were not to be attacked or obstructed.” Lieutenant General Kálmán Shvoy organized a group of 20 people, comprising refugees and locals, to guard the Sopron convent so that the sisters would not be harmed. IMNNL box 32, item 199/1 18.

⁴⁷IMNNL box 48, item 157 1.



on the Catholic Church, the assassination of the Franciscan monk Fr. Szaléz Kiss,⁴⁸ the expulsion of István Barankovics's Democratic Party from Parliament, and the Pócspetri affair⁴⁹ that immediately preceded the nationalization of Church schools.

In the end, the Catholic Church's strong base, its monastic communities, were hit where it hurt most. Members of monastic orders who worked in the fields of education and health, and who practiced charity and helped people on a daily basis, were prohibited from following their vocations and banned from ministering to those entrusted to their care. The law of June 16, 1948 (BALOGH – GERGELY 2005:853–855), declaring the nationalization of religious schools, shook the entire community of the Sisters of the Redeemer. Giving up their teaching positions made the situation of the sisters impossible, not just in their schools in Sopron or Budapest but in smaller and larger settlements, too. In the latter case, even their accommodation often became problematic, thus they either had to rely on the goodwill of the locals or return to the motherhouse to avoid being left homeless. On August 30, 1948, the sisters were expelled from the Mezőkövesd convent and were left without a home. Eventually, they were given the so-called Kulcsár House, which had been vacated by the People's College, although the Communist Party were willing to hand it over to the parish only if the sisters lived there, since they were now decidedly in the way at the convent school.⁵⁰ A sister who wrote the history of the Mezőkövesd house described the painful memory of having to hand over the building in a big hurry to the newly arriving teacher⁵¹ and his large family.⁵² Following the decision by the Episcopate on June 7, 1948, that no diocesan priest, monk, or nun — with the exception of religious education — was permitted

⁴⁸Szaléz Kiss, OFM (Szeged, 1904 – Sopronkőhida, 1946). In April 1946, the political police arrested young people from Gyöngyös while investigating an armed assassination attempt against Soviet soldiers. The Franciscan monk Szaléz Kiss was accused of incitement to murder and concealing weapons. After his arrest, he was sentenced to death and was executed in circumstances that remain unclear to this day.

⁴⁹On June 6, 1948, the inhabitants of the village of Pócspetri (Szabolcs County) protested against the nationalization of the local church-run public school. While two policemen were trying to force the protesters out, one of them accidentally shot himself. The local parish priest, notary, and a teacher, among others, were arrested. The case was brought before an improvised court in Budapest, where the notary and the parish priest were sentenced to death in a show trial. The President of the Republic changed the latter's sentence to life imprisonment. The incident was exploited by communist propaganda for its own anti-clerical purposes.

⁵⁰IMNNL box 32, item 46. The Convent School (officially the Girls' Public Higher Elementary School of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer) opened in 1926 and was the most modern school in Mezőkövesd, boasting the most classrooms, from the second half of the 1920s. JACSO 2013:514

⁵¹István Répászky, a teacher from Tarnabod, moved to Mezőkövesd in 1939 to the so-called Old Town Hall School, known as the Convent School after the war, which later operated as Elementary School No. I following nationalization.

⁵²The teacher is still remembered by older members of the local community: "Répászky was the first headmaster. He took down the crosses in every classroom. He was under orders. He had to. He ordered Fügedi to take the crosses up to the attic. They came in the middle of class to remove them, it wasn't a secret. Some people scolded him for taking them down. But he said, 'My dear, don't scold me, I'm under orders. If I don't do it, I'll suffer the consequences.'" (Borbála Fügedi/b. 1935/ Mezőkövesd, August 9, 2022). Although the community of sisters in Mezőkövesd was also traumatized by having to abandon the school, and thus their vocation and their home, the individual sisters did not harbor any resentment towards the teacher. Decades later, one of the Mezőkövesd sisters reassured the teacher's daughter of this: "Then I went to see Kati Vámos, because she wanted to talk to me, and concerning my father she told me: 'We remember him only with love.'" (Terézia Répászky (b). 1939) Mezőkövesd, September 23, 2022.



to take up a post as headmaster or teacher in a nationalized school,⁵³ the Sisters of the Redeemer were obliged to surrender their most important vocation.⁵⁴ “We were called on twice to accept nationalization, although the Church would not allow us to teach under these circumstances. We wish to remain faithful to our Church and our vocation.”⁵⁵ Having been banned from teaching, the sisters adapted to the new situation and tried to find new occupations. They had already been preparing for difficult times by organizing various training courses.⁵⁶ At Szent Margit’s High School in Budapest, for example, the sisters had set up a sewing workshop in their barricaded⁵⁷ quarters, and the parents of former students supplied them with orders, thus contributing to their livelihood. “But thanks be to God, our common-sense superiors, with their practical experience of life, did not despair. We immediately obtained a business permit from the council of the 11th district and opened our ‘Margit school sewing workshop’. ... The parents of the 1,000 or so pupils provided us with plenty of work. So, the children of the Szent Imre district paraded in clothes made in the institute’s sewing workshop, both in the street and at school.”⁵⁸ Some of the sisters were reassigned by the leadership of the order to work alongside the nursing sisters, or were sent to provide home nursing.⁵⁹ Sewing itself was feasible for a time, since clothes were in short supply among the “unclothed” post-war population. It also offered a solution for some time for the sisters who had lost their jobs at the school in Győrújváros, but who were still living in the building. “The parents of our former students brought us material: we undertook

⁵³Minutes of the Extraordinary Bishops’ Conference held in Budapest at the Institute of the Congregation of Jesus on June 7, 1948 (BEKE 2015:426).

⁵⁴Sopron, where the Sisters of the Redeemer had their motherhouse, also protested against the nationalization of the Church schools. On June 7, 1948, students in Sopron organized a demonstration against the nationalization of Church schools. One of the speakers at the demonstration was Marianna Németh, a student at the Mária Josephinum, the order’s school in Sopron. She was later sentenced to one month’s imprisonment for organizing and actively participating in the demonstration, while Sister Antoni Aristella, who was hiding her, was sentenced to one year in jail. IMNNL box 30, item 189. (“Sister Aristella did not receive the verdict: one of her fellow prisoners was assigned to clerical duties and provided her with a copy, but it was written on such flimsy paper that it could no longer be photocopied and was not accepted when she applied for compensation. I made a copy of it.”) (Observation made by Sister Mária Elma Ribai) (RIBAI 1997:155–190; NÉMETH 1991).

⁵⁵IMNNL box 32, item 46.

⁵⁶One of the most obvious solutions was to start cantor training. For sisters who were sent to serve in parishes in the smaller and larger settlements, music represented the principal opportunity for employment. In a letter dated August 9, 1949, Mother Mária Archangela Flettner requested the approval of the Bishop of Győr, Kálmán Papp, to begin the training, which she received within a few days, on August 12. IMNNL box 10, item 78/b.

⁵⁷The corridors leading to the sisters’ quarters were barricaded with furniture to prevent the sisters from meeting their former students. Similarly, at the Szent József Institute in Sopron: “The sisters’ living quarters included the *clausura*, as well as the chapel, dining room, and kitchen. Walls were constructed on two levels. The front of the school upstairs was divided only by a closed swing door, through which the secret police and police would come marching in.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Unknown sister.

⁵⁸IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Edit Eszterle.

⁵⁹Sisters from Győr-Újváros who were no longer permitted to teach were hired to provide home nursing. They took on the round-the-clock care of a sick grandmother, until the head of the family was threatened with losing his business license if he continued to employ the nurses. They had to be dismissed, although the family tried to help them in secret. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Józsa Královics.



knitting or crocheting, and we also cared for the sick among the students' families."⁶⁰ Another temporary solution for the former teaching sisters was to move to rural areas, primarily to parishes, where they ran the rectory, worked as sacristans and Church tax collectors, served as choristers, or were sometimes entrusted by the parish priest to provide religious instruction, where this was possible. From Christmas 1948, however, they were not even allowed to provide religious education: "We gradually lost our connection with our pupils, which had continued to exist up until then," explains the chronicle of the Ács house.⁶¹ Many sisters suffered greatly at being deprived of their teaching positions and banned from their chosen vocation. The farewell lines penned by Sister Mária Erika Szabó are poignant: "and we are left here like a bare tree, an empty nest...the Hungarian teaching sister makes a burnt offering of what is dearest to her heart, the renunciation of her teaching and educational work."⁶² At the same time, many were grateful to be able to live in the monastic community, at least during the transitional period: "since all activities were performed according to the usual routine, we suffered neither spiritual nor material loss; we worked with the same peace of mind as when we were teaching."⁶³ Deprived of their teaching positions, the sisters enjoyed the support and sympathy of the rural communities. "At the start of the 1948/49 academic year, the eyes of the parents and of all well-meaning people turned to us. They felt sorry for us and wanted to help. The nobility of their hearts was reflected in the generous donations they heaped on us day after day. They fed us abundantly and cared for us generously."⁶⁴

As members of the hospital staff, the Sisters of the Redeemer were respected by doctors and patients alike. The motherhouse endeavored to ensure adequate training for them.⁶⁵ With the institutionalization of healthcare, they were constantly called on, and the Sopron motherhouse sent them out at the request of eminent professors, or they accompanied the doctor to his new post with the consent of the order's leadership. According to the order's chronicle, the dismissal of

⁶⁰IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Józsa Královics.

⁶¹IMNNL box 32, item 200.

⁶²IMNNL No details, RIBAI 1994:340.

⁶³IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Edit Eszterle.

⁶⁴IMNNL box 32, item 200.

⁶⁵IMNNL box 11, item 80. See the documents on nursing training. According to a 1940 statement, among the 504 nurses working in the 17 hospitals in existence at the time (Baja – Central Hospital; Budapest – Herzog Clinic; Budapest – Illyés Clinic; Budapest – Szt. István Hospital; Budapest XIV, Stefánia Road Medical Institute; Csorna – Margit Hospital; Győr-Nádorváros – Trinity Hospital; Kapuvár – Public Hospital; Kassa – State Hospital; Sárvár – Public Hospital; Sopron – Erzsébet Hospital; Szeged – Medical Clinic; Szentés – General Hospital; Szigetvár – General Hospital; Szolnok – General Hospital; Tata-Tóváros – Private General Hospital; Zalaegerszeg – Public Hospital) 209 had a nursing qualification or had completed nursing training of between one and three years. IMNNL box 11, item 80/4. After the war, the Ministry of Public Welfare aimed to standardize nursing training. In the summer of 1945, the Unified Curriculum for Nursing Courses was compiled, with a significant emphasis on practical training. "When our highest Superiors recognized the danger that the new compulsory training would entail for the monastic vocation and religious spirit in the context of secular schools, they decided to open a Nursing Training Institute for their own order and its members." This is how one document summarizes the reasons behind the launch of the nursing training in the house of the Sisters of the Redeemer in Horánszky Street in 1946. The training took place in the Szent István Hospital, where over 100 sisters from the order were in service. IMNNL box 11, item 80/6.



nursing sisters from the Fásor Sanatorium began in the autumn of 1949.⁶⁶ The termination of the nursing sisters' employment contracts and their being turned out into the street was a relatively hushed (BORSODI 2000:196) yet profoundly felt⁶⁷ attack on the Church. Several doctors specifically insisted that the sisters be kept on.⁶⁸ They were considered reliable, while former patients remembered their nurses with gratitude in several recollections. Recollections of the dismissals include several dramatic scenes of doctors fighting back tears, distressed at the departure of their loyal colleagues.⁶⁹ At the time of their dismissal from the hospitals, they were told on several occasions that if they would set aside their monastic habits and leave the order they could naturally continue to work as nurses. This is confirmed by most of the recollections. There is no evidence that any of the sisters actually accepted this option; they preferred insecurity.⁷⁰ The apparently reasonable arguments of the authorities, agitation, and attempts at persuasion failed to achieve the desired result. "When it was my turn, I said that my things were in the department of surgery, in my office as theatre sister. Since I was no longer allowed to leave the dining room, I was accompanied by two people, the party secretary and his colleague. First, they wanted to set the right mood: they said that my life was going to be extremely difficult, then they started the agitation. They promised me everything, a high salary, even holidays; they would take care of everything. I thanked them for their proposals but told them that I had made the same decision as my sisters. They really took offence at this. In the end, they said goodbye to me, telling me that if I changed my mind and wanted to work again, the door would always be open."⁷¹

INTERMENT

The well-devised and effective series of attacks on the Church by the communist regime was clearly apparent even to the members of the order. The direct persecution of the Church was

⁶⁶The Fásor Sanatorium was one of the most distinguished medical institutions, where doctors preferred to send their patients. It was privately owned and later became a joint-stock company, with the future director, internal medicine specialist Dr. József Kiss as one of the shareholders. It was during his internship at the Korányi Clinic that he met sisters from the Congregation of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer. In his early days as director, he asked for sisters to work there and had a chapel set up, and in 1945 he rented an apartment for them in Damjanich Street. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Hieronyma Pertinger.

⁶⁷"They're 'written off', like discarded inventory items." IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Cortonella Lázár.

⁶⁸According to the sisters' recollections, at Internal Medicine Clinic I in Budapest, Professor Rusznyák bade farewell to the sisters with tears in his eyes. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Celina Holper. At the Szent István Hospital, senior consultant József Lendvai is said to have felt ill as he broke the bad news to the nurses, and a chair had to be fetched for him in case he collapsed. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Unknown sister. At the Erzsébet Hospital in Sopron, senior surgeon Jenő Király refused to dismiss the nurses, instead resigning from his post. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Krisztella. The director of Zalaegerszeg Hospital, who had worked with the sisters for 30 years, apologized in tears for having to break such terrible news to them. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Margit Szabó.

⁶⁹Including Sister Antonella from the Szent István Hospital. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23.

⁷⁰"The director József Zalay asked us to stay on at the hospital but not to wear our habits, as we were no longer permitted to work in them. We were given a briefing by the mother superior, who told us to stick together and leave, dressed in our habits. We weren't to believe that we could stay on, it was only hearsay. So we didn't take off our habits, and the next day they loaded us onto a truck and took us to the station." IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Domiciella Horváth. The same report was given by Sister Mária Luciana Mórocz. IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Lucinia Móricz.

⁷¹IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Unknown sister.



shocking in its growing intensity, not only with the nationalization of the schools but also with the show trial of Cardinal Mindszenty,⁷² permanent harassment, and vehement anti-clerical agitation. Negotiations between the state and the Catholic Church reached an impasse in the summer of 1950, and the communist regime sought to bring the episcopate to its knees by eliminating the monastic communities. The internments began in settlements close to the western border, thus the first Sisters of the Redeemer to be deported were those in Nagykapornak, on June 10, 1950. The other houses followed within a few days, while a general round-up took place on the night of June 18, when internments began from the motherhouse in Sopron, among others. At around 11.30 p.m., canvas-covered trucks arrived at the Sopron motherhouse. On entering the house,⁷³ the men cut the bell ropes, overran the corridors, herded everyone into the living room, read out the order of internment,⁷⁴ recited a list of names, and gave the sisters approximately seven minutes to pack their things. The seven trucks then set off with the sisters, some heading towards Fót and others to Pilisliget.⁷⁵ The sisters were taken to various settlements in the country, including Mezőkövesd, Zirc, Máriabesnyő, Szécsény, and Újszász, wherever the deportees could be squeezed into the houses of other monastic communities. Where the sisters stayed together (mainly the sisters from the Sopron and Budapest houses), they on the whole accepted the fact of internment calmly, much to the discomfiture of the authorities.⁷⁶ The

⁷²József Mindszenty (Csehimindszent, 1892 – Vienna, 1975) was cardinal, primate, and archbishop of Esztergom. Between 1944 and 1945 he was bishop of Veszprém, and from 1945 he was archbishop of Esztergom, the highest ecclesiastical dignitary in Hungary. He was arrested in December 1948, and in February 1949 he was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment in a show trial. He was freed during the 1956 uprising and fled to the U.S. Embassy in the days of the Soviet intervention. From there, under an agreement between the Vatican and the Hungarian Government, he left for Vienna in 1971. He died there in 1975. His remains were transported to Hungary and buried in Esztergom in 1991.

⁷³“The internment took place on June 18, 1950, during the night of the deportations. They broke in with great brutality. They used the butts of their guns to smash through the sealed trapdoors separating us from the nationalized school building. One of our elderly sisters died of shock.” *IMNNL box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Lujza Huszár, 2.* The sudden death of Sister Evangelista was mentioned in many of the recollections. The dead sister’s companions were not allowed to go to her, nor could a priest be summoned. The troops who had broken in called for a hearse. It was Sister Mária Evangelista Posch Józsa (Szentkút, 1876 – Sopron, 1950) who died that night. “In the last decades of her life she held the office of Mother Superior in our schools. She spent her well-earned retirement years in the villa at the motherhouse. On the night of the deportation, when we were invaded by armed police, her sudden death put the seal of inhumanity on what had taken place. Even her funeral was marked by caution and circumspection.” *IMNNL box 50, item 240, 34.*

⁷⁴Details of the final decision are quoted in *IMNNL no details, RIBAI 1994:370.*

⁷⁵Efforts were made to keep aspiring sisters, the so-called novices, away from the convents, since no one could be certain when the deportations would begin. Mária Melania Mezei was a novice when the turbulent period began. “News that the houses had been abolished filtered down to us novices. Most of the novices had already been sent home to their families, and only seven of us remained...At this time, we were staying with Catholic families in Sopron, so that we young people wouldn’t be caught in a night raid. That’s what our superiors thought best. But they only managed to push us out of the motherhouse very late in the evening, because deep down we still hoped we might be deported as well.” *IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Melania Mezei.*

⁷⁶Surprisingly, in one rural house in Fertőrákos, the uninvited guests were even served refreshments. “We found out from the local authorities the exact time the secret police would come to take us away. We packed up our essentials and placed them ready at the front door. I baked some scones, and we sat there waiting for them to take us away, with the scones set out on the dining-room table.” *IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Beatissima Bodorkos.*



internments took place at night, out of fear of social resistance, among other things.⁷⁷ In the case of the sisters interned in Fót, both the local parish priest⁷⁸ and members of the local population were extremely helpful.⁷⁹ Interestingly, the local baker in Fót supplied fresh bread rolls for the 55 interned sisters, thus it was in the internment camp that they received the first rolls they had seen since the outbreak of the war.⁸⁰ The same openness and affection were also shown by the people of Mezőkövesd.⁸¹ Oddly enough, internment brought the sisters not utter deprivation but rather a certain abundance. As the parish priest of Fót put it, the system had turned them into martyrs, which made the population particularly keen to help. Positive opinions of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul,⁸² who had long been established in the town, had obviously created a willingness to support the 55 new sisters. Some of the sisters wrote about their profound spiritual experiences in the Fót camp: “The unforgettable evening adorations left a deep impression in my soul.” Besides, the poverty and deprivation of the camp did not entail suffering. “At that time, we lived in true Nazarene poverty. We slept on the ground, on straw. Our tableware comprised a mug and a spoon. We washed in a trough at the well. Oh, but how good it was for the sisters to be together.”⁸³ This recollection essentially reflects the true realization of the monastic life. By living according to the three monastic vows, the sisters were able to devote themselves fully during this time to acquiring the true spirit of Christ, and in sociological terms they were able to achieve religious virtuosity.⁸⁴

⁷⁷“All this also came to light during the Sopron internment: We must have been somewhere near Solymár when we overheard a conversation between two of the policemen travelling with us. Only the sisters sitting close to them could hear them, because they were talking quietly. ‘If my mother knew what I was up to now she’d never allow me in the house again.’ Rural policemen were sent out to carry out the order, as they were afraid of the reaction of the locals.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Archangela Flettner.

⁷⁸“They recounted the full horrors of the night of the break in... They arrived exhausted, almost broken, but after their arrival, and after the official police procedure had been carried out on the spot, they immediately asked for Holy Communion. I administered it to them. I also wanted to have a few words with them, but as there was an unknown civilian (detective?) in the Church, I refrained from doing so — by the way, the area around the Church was swarming with plainclothes detectives.” Extract from the *Historia Domus* of the Roman Catholic parish of Fót. IMNNL box 31, item 195/2.

⁷⁹“The population showed such affection and compassion that it moved the sisters to tears. So much food was brought that people had to be asked not to bring any more, for fear of it going to waste... It would be no exaggeration to say that they were the most popular people in the village.” Extract from the *Historia Domus* of the Roman Catholic parish of Fót. IMNN Archives box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Edigna Kolek reported the same: “The selfless love shown by the people of Fót moved us to tears.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Edigna Kolek.

⁸⁰IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Archangela Flettner.

⁸¹“When the good people of Mezőkövesd learned that sisters had been taken there, they waited until we had been handed over to the Mezőkövesd police and then began to bring food. Rather than taking their milk and poultry to the market, they gave them to us. By noon we had enough food to last for two weeks. We told them not to bring more, that we would tell them when we ran out.” IMNNL box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Consolatrix Horváth.

⁸²Order of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

⁸³IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Edigna Kolek.

⁸⁴Term used by Max Weber, quoted by Zsuzsanna Bögre (BÖGRE 2012:94).



DISPERSION

Although the fact of internment was distressing, everyone held onto the hope that things would change for the better. Memories of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, which occasionally surfaced in the minds of older people, may perhaps have fueled the hope that this too would soon be over. “After a few weeks we ran out of room there and were transferred to the archabbey of Zirc. There was enough room for us here, and in fact they brought new prisoners during the night. Spiritually, it was very good here; we were given many good things by the good Cistercian fathers. They even consoled us. ‘It won’t last much longer! We can put up with it even standing on our heads...’ Then, one fine day, it was all over. They announced: ‘You can leave, you can go wherever you want.’ And that’s how our civilian life began.”⁸⁵ The confidence that things would not go on forever was also a firmly held idea when it came to saving possessions: “We saved our belongings among the better families in the village. I remember a very nice upright piano, and we also stowed away a lot of things in hidden corners of the building, trusting that we would soon be back!”⁸⁶ In fact, some of the superiors did not even consider it worth investing in proper civilian clothes, since the dispersion would anyway not last long: “The mother superior didn’t think it worth investing in civilian clothes; she said we could easily put up with things for such a short time... The ‘short’ time turned into 40 long years.”⁸⁷ The experiences shared in the camps, and the shared sense of being outcasts, made the bonds among the sisters even stronger. On hearing about the community of sisters living in the camps, those who had been forced to leave the community a few weeks earlier (postulants, for example) visited the internees without any sense of fear in order to be with them.⁸⁸ One of the biggest challenges after the order was dispersed was living everyday life alone, and missing the community.

For the sisters, who had left their families, relationships with parents and siblings had changed, and they were rarely able to reconnect with them. Being discharged from the camp meant abandoning their monastic habits for good and dressing in civilian clothes. This was perhaps the most distressing experience for the sisters and became an indelible and painful memory. Discarding the habit felt like being stripped naked.⁸⁹ Despite donning civilian clothes, they moved awkwardly in their new outfits, and it was obvious from their faces and hairstyles

⁸⁵IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Emilia Németh.

⁸⁶IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Beatissima Bodorkos.

⁸⁷IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Aura Kertész.

⁸⁸The prohibition from social activity was so traumatic for some that they reported symptoms of depression: “At home I couldn’t do anything: I went to mass in the morning, came home, then went back to bed, facing the wall and having no contact with the people around me. This went on for three weeks. They wanted to call a doctor, but then, acting on a sudden impulse, I decided to find out where Fót was, where they’d taken the sisters. I got on the train and there I was. We were happy to see each other in the camp, but I couldn’t stay there. It was so painful. I would truly have felt at home there. I went back home but I soon made the same journey again.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Melania Mezei.

⁸⁹“That’s how I set off for Tatabánya, dressed in civilian clothes. This humiliation, the feeling of shame, could only be experienced rather than described. It felt as if everyone was staring at me. As if I had no clothes on. I didn’t even dare to look up.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Annuncia Kolonics. In the house in Újszász, Mother Linusa fainted when she had to take off her habit. IMNNL box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Consolatrix Horváth. “When I had to take off my habit, it was as if my skin had been peeled off.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Medeola.



that they had previously worn veils.⁹⁰ Their former lives were plainly recognizable, even when they dressed in civilian clothes. Many were unable to get hold of suitable civilian outfits, so they left wearing whatever clothes they could find: “My younger sister and I set off for our aunt’s house in Mosonszolnok wearing a petticoat and a dressing gown. As we were getting near Levél,⁹¹ the conductor came and sat next to us: ‘So, sisters, where are you going?’”⁹² Some tried to avoid being caught without clothes: “I was frightened. I wore civilian clothes underneath. I had my nun’s habit on top, so I wouldn’t end up naked if I had to take it off.”⁹³ Sewing rooms were set up in the convents, where attempts were made to prepare for life without habits. In the period between the nationalization of the schools and internment, the sisters not only made garments to order but also made civilian clothes for themselves. In the smaller houses in the countryside, this was not really possible; indeed, the sisters who returned to rural areas, to more closed village communities, were aware of the shocked staring behind their backs. “Then we heard the sad news that even those living with families were no longer permitted to wear their habits. What a tearful morning it was! On my way to Holy Mass, the villagers stopped and looked at me without a word.”⁹⁴ Fear on account of those nuns who continued to wear their habits also affected priests who were still working within the diocesan framework. The local parish priest in Rábacsanak adopted a tough stance to prevent such zealous sisters from getting him into trouble. “I was at home, in Rábacsanak, when the order was dispersed, and on June 20, 1950, I went to Mass still wearing my habit. Before Mass, the parish priest summoned me into the sacristy and scolded me severely for not putting aside my habit, as I could get him into trouble. He then allowed me to hear Mass in the side chapel. The next day, the feast day of St. Aloysius, I had no choice but to remove my habit with a heavy heart, but it was as if my skin were being peeled away, too. I felt naked. It was a dreadful feeling.”⁹⁵ But even without their habits, in their demure civilian clothes, they stood out from the other members of the local community: “For a long time, they wore long black skirts, they were easily recognizable, we knew immediately which of them had been sisters.”⁹⁶ And having put aside their monastic clothing, they did not abandon their monastic comportment. Their monastic way of life, learned and engrained according to the prescribed rules, was perpetuated in their gestures, routines, and mentality, truly setting them apart from the civilian population. “Throughout their lives, their very being distinguished the nuns from ordinary folk. They weren’t chatterboxes like the peasant girls. They had that kind of bearing. They were more sedate. You could see it in everything. In their movements, in the way they spoke.”⁹⁷

⁹⁰“They were all easy to recognize because of their extremely plain clothing and their white foreheads above their tanned faces.” IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Edit Eszterle.

⁹¹Levél is a village in Győr-Moson-Sopron County.

⁹²IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Józsa Královics.

⁹³IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Alfonsa Albert.

⁹⁴IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Beatina Márkus.

⁹⁵IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Mária Bellarmina Nagy.

⁹⁶Mrs. József Bollók (b. 1931). Mezőkövesd, August 23, 2022.

⁹⁷Mrs. Mátvás Bollók (b. 1952). Mezőkövesd, August 23, 2022.



Ties with the sisters' own families were not only transformed⁹⁸ but often represented a threat to parents, siblings, and relatives. They tried to get by without them in the long run, so as to protect their relatives. In the early days, however, almost all the sisters took their chances in their parents' homes, which seemed the most straightforward solution. Most families always had need of a hardworking woman, a devoted, loving nurse to look after sick relatives, someone to run the household, to keep the house and its surroundings tidy, to carry out Church duties and look after children. "There was always someone sick in the family, or others who needed help, and by the will and purpose of the good Lord, we were there to help family members who were suffering a great deal."⁹⁹ Sister Consulita's testimony also illustrates how peace of mind was found in the will of God. Her recollections contain no traces of bitterness about her fate, and no resentment about what had happened. Witnessing members of her family suffering similar hardships in their lives as kulaks [peasants persecuted for their relative prosperity] may have contributed to this. The families endeavored to protect their daughters in their difficult situation. Sister Mária Józsa Královics returned to her parents' home in the summer of 1950. "They kept me in a curtained room; they were frightened because sisters who'd taken refuge with families were already being rounded up. We had a store, and they came to check whether or not we were there."¹⁰⁰ Afraid of the consequences, not all families could take on the risk of harboring class enemies. "I went to Makó, but my sister didn't dare take me in because of her job and her three children."¹⁰¹ Not everyone was happy to see the sisters returning home. "I went to my parents' home in Rábapordány, but my brother-in-law didn't look kindly on my staying there. Mother Superior Richarda took me into the convent. (The local convent was still in operation for a while after nationalization.)¹⁰² But no sooner had I settled in than I had to leave again. A well-wisher

⁹⁸"In the morning, Dad went with me over the hill, carrying the bag. When we got to the top of the hill, Dad turned to me and asked: 'Margit, if things were to change, would you go back?' I was surprised by his question; I wondered how he could ask such a thing, since I hadn't left of my own accord, I'd been forced to. He put down the bag and said: 'If your Mother Linusa is dearer to you than your old, sick parents, then just go', and he went back. I felt as if my heart would break. I picked up the bag and walked for hours over the hills and valleys in tears." IMNNL box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Consolatrix Horváth.

⁹⁹IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Consulita Németh.

¹⁰⁰IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Józsa Královics.

¹⁰¹IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Gráciána Benedek.

¹⁰²The unusual history of the Rábapordány convent may provide an explanation for this. In the 1930s, the local Alaker family donated their home to the convent. Their eldest son had become a Jesuit monk and their daughter a Sister of the Redeemer. At the time of nationalization, the sisters were allowed to stay in a part of the house, and Sister Mária Richarda Alaker, a Sister of the Redeemer, also returned to the house to take in some of her fellow sisters during the transition period. The extant documents indicate that the nationalization committee intended to take the whole building into state ownership, including an apartment reserved for the founders, which was then occupied by the widowed Mrs. Ferenc Alaker. It had been stipulated in the deed of foundation that the widow was to be cared for by the sisters for the remainder of her life, and this was accepted by the nationalization committee. The sisters, presumably under the leadership of Sister Richarda, appealed against the nationalization of the private residence and its outbuildings, although apart from the recollections there is no other evidence that they were allowed to remain in the convent for a time under Sister Richarda's leadership. IMNNL box 15, item 105. Terézia Alaker, Sister Mária Richarda, died in Rábapordány on March 22, 1956. A summary concerning the deceased sisters includes the following information: "In 1950, she was living in her parents' home, and her brother had been declared a kulak. The servant girl threw chaff (the waste separated from the threshed grain) onto the fodder when it was delivered. He was held responsible — and ended up in jail." IMNNL box 50, item 241, 51.



had told the kind mother superior that anyone found in the convent at night would be taken away...Whenever someone spoke to me, I burst into tears. Back to my parents' house, back to the quarrels with my brother-in-law. I worked as hard as I could, praying at night that this wretched situation would come to an end. My brother-in-law still called me a freeloader. He quarreled a great deal with my mother because of me."¹⁰³ A similar experience was described by Sister Consolatrix: "...after that I went home to my parents. I lived there for a year and a half, but there was no peace at home because of me. Then I went to my aunt's house, but my situation was no more secure there."¹⁰⁴ Harassment by the party-state was part of the daily routine. The communist regime regarded all former monks and nuns, as well as the wealthier peasants, as enemies. Former nuns experienced discrimination not only because of their monastic past but also because of their forebears and the status of their families. "We were burdened with being kulaks; we were considered unreliable and were dispossessed. We 'deserved nothing', and if we went into a shop we were turned away. But they drove us out at night to guard the village, even my younger sister who was sick. We worked hard, but we had no bread; they took everything."¹⁰⁵ However, those families who did want to help often ended up in trouble themselves. "There were some good people who would have been more than happy to help us in our isolation, but they became a danger to their families. The authorities persecuted them, along with the nuns. So anyone who did take us in had to endure the harassment and hardships that came with it."¹⁰⁶ Sisters who returned to the village were also ostracized and stigmatized by the local communist leadership. "Back at home, we were received with distress. My mother was afraid of what would happen. On Sunday evening, there was a party meeting. The party secretary stated that coming home was pointless, that they'd have me taken away anyway. I could come back again once I'd had five or six children. On Monday morning the whole village was talking about it."¹⁰⁷

DAY-TO-DAY SURVIVAL

As mentioned above, the source material on which the present paper draws comprises the memories of those nuns who kept their vows to the end and who remained loyal to their order. Thus, it is from the perspective of the "faithful" that we are able to recall events and draw the respective conclusions. However, as yet we have no data on exactly how many of the sisters left their vocations after the order was dispersed, opting instead for civilian or family life. We know from a few brief references that such sisters existed.¹⁰⁸ We are obliged to discuss what we know from the available sources while acknowledging the need for additional research to further refine the picture. For the sisters who left the order, the real hardship was to live independently, without a community. Mother Superior Archangela's prediction that a time would come when

¹⁰³IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Alinda Szűcs.

¹⁰⁴IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Consolatrix Horváth.

¹⁰⁵IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Consulita Németh.

¹⁰⁶IMNNL box 31, item 195/2. Sister Mária Lumina Burian.

¹⁰⁷IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Vitusa Linter.

¹⁰⁸See footnote 1.



the sisters would have to “stand their ground in this world alone and homeless” had become a reality. Community life was not rendered impossible in the internment camps. The chance to live together invigorated the community, and in fact the difficult living conditions, such as sleeping on the ground, the meagre food, and the fact of being removed by force, were a particular inspiration for the young sisters and represented an “authentic” way to follow Christ. Up to that point, they had been given precise instructions by their superiors; they had not had to make decisions for themselves in any matters, big or small, but had simply carried out instructions in a spirit of obedience. Everyday decision making presented them with a new challenge. However, in the unfamiliar territory of independence, they felt the presence of Providence. “I have felt the guidance of Divine Providence from the moment I stopped wearing my habit right up until the present day. I sensed it at all times, in every step I took, right from the railway station, offering me protection and physical and spiritual help in the most trying times.”¹⁰⁹ Having been dismissed from the hospital, Sister Auriána spent a short time in the “Squirrel House”¹¹⁰ before returning to her family. There, however, she faced fresh family conflicts, as they could not understand why she clung to her vocation in her present situation. “My parents and siblings were looking forward to having me at home.... They had plans for me. But I didn’t go along with them.”¹¹¹ Besides their intellectual and spiritual struggle against the regime, others had to fight with their families as a result of their inner convictions. For many, it was clear that a rational decision had to be made in the newly emerging situation, which made it necessary to renounce the monastic life, even as an individual, and to integrate into civil society, not only in the world of labor but also in terms of traditional family life. “Against my parents’ wishes I followed God’s call to the monastic life. I trained to be a nurse. My last position was at Szent István Hospital. In 1950, I returned to my parents’ home. Everyone had the same concern, to persuade me to abandon my vocation. Even the police did their best, but to no avail. It was all simply a prelude to the spiritual struggles of the coming years.”¹¹² The sisters’ accounts suggest that their greatest challenge was not deprivation and harassment but the fear of losing their vocation in isolation. Most of those who recorded their recollections wished to continue their everyday lives according to the rules of the order. But the experience of vocation was so bound up with the community that many of them had no idea from the outset how to go about it on their own in everyday life.

The sisters who had been dispersed but who still considered themselves to be nuns had to adapt to the new situation. Their identity could not be bruised, and as individuals they continued to live their everyday lives as nuns. Their practice of prayer, their participation in the Holy Mass¹¹³ and their observance of the order’s rule in their individual lives could mostly be described as complete. They were willing to make sacrifices to achieve this, even when their

¹⁰⁹IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Priszka Jakubecz.

¹¹⁰The “Mókus-ház” [Squirrel House] villa at 8 (now 12) Ménesi Road, Budapest. In 1925, the villa became the property of the Sisters of the Redeemer, and following nationalization in the 1960s it was given to Eötvös Loránd University. Since 1983, it has been home to the István Bibó College.

¹¹¹IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Auriána Sebők.

¹¹²IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Auriána Sebők.

¹¹³According to the state security’s background report on Sister Mária Lujza Huszár, her neighbors in the house on Késmárki Road confirmed that she “lives according to the rules of the former monastic order. She goes to the Church on Villányi Road two or three times a day, at 6 a.m., in the afternoon, and in the evening.” ÁBTLL 3.1.5 O-13140. 27.



schedules were less flexible. Of the three traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, it is the last in particular that can best be experienced in everyday life in a community, under the supervision of superiors. To continue a life of obedience after the order was dispersed, it was essential to maintain a living network of relationships and connections with the superiors and with the mother superior, Mother Archangela. Everyone, including the leaders, was determined to establish and maintain this network of contacts, as it was the only way in which the sisters could help one another and ease their situation. The sisters tried to function as a community even underground. Mother Mária Archangela Flettner, whose role was that of superior general, took this task to heart and tried to coordinate and supervise her dispersed daughters. After September 1950, the mother superior was able to settle in Piliscsaba, where she served as a cantor. From there, she did her best to keep an eye on the other members of the order. “Sister Lujza visited me in hiding to bring me the news and affairs. The whereabouts of the sisters soon became known. We divided the area into districts, and a leader was assigned to each district, who visited the sisters and reported on their health and circumstances. Mother Mária Ella and I visited those living in the town.”¹¹⁴ The state security were aware of what was happening and opened a personal file on her on March 13, 1951.¹¹⁵ The state security files on the mother superior also contain transcripts of telephone conversations, which reveal that on several occasions sometimes as many as 15 sisters gathered in a Budapest apartment, in a certain Putnoki villa,¹¹⁶ which was certainly also where Sister Ilona Lujza Huszár rented an apartment,¹¹⁷ as confirmed by the recollections of Sister Mária Madleine Bódis.¹¹⁸ Because of the harassment of the mother superior, the sisters tried to keep the whereabouts of Mother Archangela a secret, even from their fellow sisters. “Actually, one of the other sisters lived in Késmárki Street. While I was there, I heard Mother Archangela’s voice from the room next door. I cried so hard that I wasn’t allowed to go in and talk to her. But she was being kept hidden from us by the superiors, so that she wouldn’t get into trouble.”¹¹⁹ Besides the dossier on Sister Archangela, the state security proposed that a group dossier under the name “Redeemers” be opened on March 3, 1967, due to suspicions about illegal cohabitation by members of the order, religious training, and criminal foreign contacts.¹²⁰ According to the state security, the sisters had continued their community life by organizing in a so-called cell, even after they had been dispersed. A detailed report was compiled, describing the daily lives, routines, and hierarchy

¹¹⁴TMNNL box 48, item 157, 13.

¹¹⁵The proposal was made to open the dossier on March 13, 1951, as “she was superior general of the disbanded order of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer, with jurisdiction throughout the world.” UBTL O-12032 1.

¹¹⁶According to the Budapest Telephone Directory, December 1950, 367, Jenő Putnoki: Budapest, 8 Késmárki Street. Tel: 456-031 https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/FszekCimNevTarak_20_019_14/?pg=416&layout=s (accessed October 3, 2022).

¹¹⁷According to the Budapest Telephone Directory, December 1950, 367, Jenő Putnoki: Budapest, 8 Késmárki Street. Tel: 456-031 https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/FszekCimNevTarak_20_019_14/?pg=416&layout=s (accessed October 3, 2022).

¹¹⁸According to the Budapest Telephone Directory, December 1950, 367, Jenő Putnoki: Budapest, 8 Késmárki Street. Tel: 456-031 https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/FszekCimNevTarak_20_019_14/?pg=416&layout=s (accessed October 3, 2022).

¹¹⁹Sister Mária Madleine Bódis (b. 1930). Budapest, November 3, 2022.

¹²⁰ÁBTL O-13140 7.



among the sisters who lived together. “According to informants, Brezovics and her companions lead an organized religious life at the address ... and, among other things, they attempt to conceal by the furnishing of the apartment the fact that they are still living in what is almost a monastic community... In the last room facing onto Zsák Street, they have even set up a domestic altar, where evening ‘worship’ is performed by those living together in the apartment. They follow a monastic discipline. Brezovics is held in great esteem; when a member of the order meets her in the courtyard, she approaches her with visible humility, bowing her head in greeting. These external signs are clear indications of Brezovics’s role as leader.”¹²¹ From the report, it is clear that the apartments were transformed into mini convents, which were then presumably connected to one another. The sisters tried to settle and live near one another. Although the communist leadership under Rákosi was then particularly wary of precisely this,¹²² eventually such attempts became reality, and a peculiar kind of monastic life was achieved. Networking existed even among those living in the same settlement. In Mezőkövesd, meetings were held at set intervals, but extremely cautiously, concealing any kind of evidence that might suggest the existence of an active network: “Every month, the sisters from the neighborhood gathered here to talk on Sunday afternoons, in a separate room in our house. The Mother Superior kept in touch by letters. But anything tangible was done away with, we never saw anything. There are no mementos, only recollections. She received letters from ‘Someone,’ and she told me that she was allowed to buy a television, but she soon sold it because of the ‘immoral’ programs.”¹²³

The communist regime was particularly angered when former religious came into contact with youngsters. In certain cases, this was something they were unable to prevent. In some rural communities, the sisters continued to teach children privately; they gave language lessons or taught typing, which was becoming an increasingly important skill to have at that time. They also tried to bring young people together for important Church festivals and events. “They gathered the children around them in secret, but it wasn’t public knowledge. It wasn’t greatly publicized.”¹²⁴ They continued to provide religious education for the children when they could, which helped the parents. “When the religious orders had been dispersed, they would gather the children together for the festivals, preparing them for Christmas, Pentecost, first communion, or the Corpus Christi flower carpets. They participated in everything. She was a nun, and she took the children. They helped a lot... When it was time to prepare for the festivals, they would go to the houses and talk to the mothers about making a nativity scene. “This is what we’re thinking of, please come and help us! Can your children come? Shall we come and fetch them, or will you bring them?”¹²⁵ It wasn’t just the younger ones they tried to gather together, but the older girls too, although this had already come to the attention of the authorities. “I started studying typing and shorthand with Kati Vámos, Sister Kati, but the neighbors were jealous because there were six of us going. We were divided into groups, but they still saw us going there

¹²¹ÁBTL 0-13140 147.

¹²²The 1950 agreement is quoted by FEJÉRDY 2021:33.

¹²³Mrs. Péter Papp (b. 1958). Mezőkövesd, July 20, 2022.

¹²⁴Mrs. Mátyás Bollók (b. 1952). Mezőkövesd, September 23, 2022.

¹²⁵Mrs. József Bollók (b. 1931). Mezőkövesd, September 23, 2022.



and someone reported it. Then she was summoned by the police. She had to stop.”¹²⁶ A peculiar version of this incident also appears in the state security reports. After lengthy interrogations and investigations, Katalin Vámos was cautioned by the police authorities for her work with young people aimed at winning them over to the goals of the Church and the order.¹²⁷

One of the big challenges after the order was dispersed was to integrate into the world of work. Sisters who were unable to return to their families had to make a living for themselves. Frequent rejections made it hard for them to find employment, after which the state labelled them as shirkers. In the early days, it was completely impossible for many of them to find work. In the vast majority of cases, it quickly became apparent that the applicants had formerly been monks or nuns, and most were rejected on this basis. Besides, in line with the ideology of the period, women’s employment had become widespread, resulting in a discernible oversupply among female job applicants. “Three of us started looking for work together: Elisabeth, Edina, and myself. Day after day we paced the hot asphalt pavements without success. Employment was hard to come by, because a decree that all women had to work had just come into force.”¹²⁸ If they did manage to find jobs, they typically managed to hold their own, and thanks to their exemplary work, they were often the embodiment of outstanding workers in the socialist state. “Our work was valued by the management. We always came first. They celebrated us with flowers and congratulatory speeches, and they wrote our names at the top... A woman from the office told us that when the managing director had arrived to inspect the factory, she’d told him: ‘I’ve got two nuns, but I wouldn’t let them go for the entire factory.’”¹²⁹ The factory environment may have felt like a mini convent and a missionary field at the same time. Where two or three sisters were working together, they were able to experience a sense of community and could even pray silently. On the other hand, they could talk to their colleagues — albeit cautiously — about their own faith, even while the propaganda was blaring constantly from the radio: “The factory was a huge mission field. ... The loudspeakers were spouting almost constantly, spreading their ‘poison.’ We had both the opportunity and the possibility to draw the attention of the more receptive souls to genuine values. One Lutheran woman commented what a good thing communism was for us, because they’d never seen nuns before, and now they were working with them. It made me think how good it would be if nuns could also work in factories, even in normal circumstances.”¹³⁰ The sisters were most often employed in parishes. This meant a relatively untroubled working environment, although it was not always accompanied by financial security.¹³¹ Since there were limited job opportunities, nothing was turned down. “Those who could returned home, to their parents’ home if they had one, or if someone else took them in. Mariska Fehér worked for the railways, beating train wheels. She worked with a hammer.”¹³² Others tried

¹²⁶Mrs. József Bollók (b. 1931). *Mezőkövesd*, September 23, 2022.

¹²⁷ÁBTL 0-13140 142.

¹²⁸IMNNL box 31, item 195/2, 1.

¹²⁹IMNNL box 31, item 195/2, 3–5

¹³⁰IMNNL box 31, item 195/2, 2.

¹³¹“I was struggling financially. The parish priest gave me 24 forints a month. I asked him if he thought it was enough. He replied, ‘You’re a sister, what do you need money for? You don’t go to the cinema. Fashion isn’t your thing.’ It was common among many priests at the time to think that sisters should be grateful if they were offered work.”

¹³²Mrs. József Bollók (b. 1931). *Mezőkövesd*, September 23, 2022.



to earn a living as factory workers, housekeepers, nurses, or Church employees, or, in one of the most interesting examples, as a tram conductor.¹³³

SUMMARY

Monastic communities form clearly delineated units within society. Besides their enclosed environments and unique rules, which are apparent at first glance, they are also systems that are constantly shaping and integrating themselves, and at the same time networks of group relationships.¹³⁴ This became even more explicit with the emergence of underground districts, since individuals were then typically in immediate, living relationships with just a few fellow members of the order and their designated superior. The creation of an underground network was key to the survival of the community and demonstrated its capacity for successful adaptation. According to Bourbeau, the capacity for resilience, meaning the ability to adapt successfully to external difficulties, can be characterized according to several types, and the phase of building an underground network demonstrates the emergence of a kind of equilibrium.¹³⁵ The presented story can help to position the monastic community among the many definitions of community, since by recalling their ordeals, a kind of community of remembrance also comes into being.¹³⁶

The Hungarian Sisters of the Redeemer experienced a series of ordeals in the second half of the twentieth century. Besides the fear and physical abuse they suffered, as well as the forced renunciation of their religious life, monastic attire, and familiar working environment, it was the threat of the loss of their identity that caused the most profound trauma.¹³⁷ In the words of one sister: “I almost lost my mind I was so homesick for life under a vow of obedience; I was afraid of myself, of losing everything that had made me so happy.” Without the support and guidance of the community, it is easier to abandon the system of values and the rules of the internal spiritual life acquired within the religious community, which might threaten the sisters’ self-identity. This fear of losing their identity was intensified by the communist regime, but sometimes also by the sisters’ own families, who in more than one instance attempted to persuade the young women to relinquish their identity and opt for a civilian life, with new aspirations. The sisters had had to leave behind the system of norms instilled in them as children when they chose a vocation in the Church, and with it they had acquired a new identity. When the communities were dispersed, they were expected to give up their religious identity as sisters in order to be reintegrated into the expectations of the family and the local community. Their identities were thus challenged, and sometimes rejected, not just by the political regime but also by their own families, out of fear of reprisals and because of economic considerations.

¹³³One of the Martonvásár sisters took a bus conductors’ course in Pest. *IMNNL box 3/b, item 23. Sister Mária Erlanda Kutrovác.*

¹³⁴Eric Wolf, quoted by TÓTH G. 2002:17.

¹³⁵Bourbeau’s subtle distinctions and typification of resilience are quoted in BÖGRE 2019:5.

¹³⁶Pierre Nora’s theory is quoted by G. TÓTH 2002:29.

¹³⁷On the issue of identity, see RICOEUR 2001:15–27; KOVÁCS – VAJDA 2002:17–33; BÖGRE 2008:77–89.



The sisters' extant life stories tell us a great deal about this issue. McAdams equates identity with the life-story narrative. According to him, a person's identity, and thus their life story, is made up of several elements, such as ideological setting/worldview, key characters, nuclear episodes, and a generativity script.¹³⁸ The quoted life stories contain these elements, from which the individual's identity can be outlined and which are then brought into question by the authorities and, in some cases, by the individual's own family. The ideological setting is obviously faith, the notion of belonging to God. This is the most difficult thing for the system to breach, since it is the most incisive element. The sense of belonging to God is fundamental, setting the direction of the individual's life despite the changed circumstances. Key characters in the sisters' identity might be their superiors, including the superior general, the provincial mothers superior, the mother superior of the house, or the novice mistresses during the period of the novitiate, for example. These are the leaders of the community, the primary figures who hold the community together. They also play a decisive role in the discernment of religious vocations, and thus in the formation of an early religious identity.¹³⁹ When the communities were dispersed, ties with these leaders were loosened and they were no longer able to play such an important role in the sisters' life stories, while the identities they had shaped were transformed. However, some of the life stories attest to close relationships with these leaders, which in the case of some sisters overwrote the idea of returning to their own family when faced with danger. These sisters chose to live with their superiors even in the face of uncertainty.¹⁴⁰ In the period presented here, from the advance of the battlefield until the end of the decades spent underground, a great many nuclear episodes and scenes were described that likewise became part of the individuals' identities and shaped the specific traits of the respective individuals within the collective memory. One such example would be Sister Viralda's stories in connection with the saving of Jews. The chronicler of the order, who wrote and catalogued brief biographies of the deceased sisters, also highlights these episodes in her life, while Sister Viralda herself recorded them in her recollections. She can thus be identified in the community's memory on the basis of these stories, reinforcing the identity-forming character of the episode. Following McAdams's train of thought, generativity — the determination and commitment of adults to secure the future of the next generation¹⁴¹ — is another important factor. In the lives of the sisters, this can be associated with their involvement in nursing and teaching, which largely defined their vocation. Being deprived of this was a truly traumatic experience. Being prohibited from practicing one's profession severely damages generativity, which Erikson also considers as one of the basic conditions for mental health (GÖRGÖY 2015:6). The words of Sister Mária Erika Szabó, headmistress of the Szent Margit High School in Buda, are revealing. She compared the sisters who had been banned from teaching, who had already fulfilled their mission, to trees from which all the fruit has been harvested, and she referred to the renunciation of teaching as a

¹³⁸McAdams's theory is quoted in GÖRGÖY 2015:7.

¹³⁹"The first impressions of my early life in the convent were associated with the venerable Mother Sztanisla. The simplicity of her room, her prayerful and busy life, the discipline of the 1920s and 1930s left their impression on my life. The respect with which Sister Róza surrounded her (I was a cleaner for her during my novitiate) and the way she accepted all the injunctions of our Venerable Mother made a lasting impression on me." IMNNL box 3/b, item 23 Mária Thomasia.

¹⁴⁰See footnote 103.

¹⁴¹McAdams's theory is quoted in GÖRGÖY 2015:6.



burnt offering.¹⁴² The vocation of teaching and education, which in their case was the defining feature of generativity, disappeared in a very short time and was difficult to replace. Their identity was severely damaged, and new perspectives and strategies were required to rebuild it. The most stable of all these factors was the awareness of belonging to God, with the implication that, as Christ's betrothed, the nun has already been claimed and appointed by Providence for Itself, a fact that cannot be undone by the pressure of any political power. Indeed, it became even more perceptible to everyone when the external frameworks were dissolved and without the formalities — the convent, the habit, and the community — the sisters undertook it in their own "nakedness." The framework essentially disappeared, but the acquired rules, mentality, and routines were indelible and were even recognizable by the secular environment. The order's regulations, contained in the "Customary," became a learned behavior, a kind of code that was burned into the consciousness. Published in 1913, the small book¹⁴³ summarizing the established and obligatory customs of the order, regulated and defined what was desirable behavior down to the smallest detail. It described not only the daily practice to be followed within the community but also interactions with the secular population and the kind of behavior to be adopted when among them. Regulations related to head and hand posture, facial expression, mien, and gait, make clear the roots of the sisters' behavior, whether living together or independently after the communities had been dispersed, and how, even without living in a convent and wearing a habit, they continued to live "monastically" to outside observers.¹⁴⁴

The traumatic impact of the sisters' ordeals is indisputable. Their sense of vulnerability, threat, and helplessness was particularly apparent when they were forced to leave the convents and internment camps, and even more so when they were forced to stop wearing their habits. The related descriptions of their deep sense of shame testify to the fact that their physical and psychological integrity were severely compromised, and their sense of self-worth was thereby destroyed. This was reinforced by the outside world, when they were obliged to keep silent and conceal their pain (POHÁRNOK – LÉNÁRD 2015:227). In some cases, the sisters' ordeals even resulted in symptoms of post-traumatic stress, which also manifested themselves in physical symptoms.¹⁴⁵ Having been exposed to permanent persecution and harassment, and then being forced underground, the congregation struggled to adapt to the situation, and while living through the trauma and slowly coming to terms with it, it developed its own specific survival strategies. For the most part, the sisters who are mentioned in the sources successfully rose to the challenges and remained true to their monastic vows despite their ordeals. Being no strangers to the world of work, they managed to find their place successfully on the socialist labor market. The biggest and most

¹⁴²IMNNL no details, RIBAI 1994:339–340.

¹⁴³IMNNL. box 1, item 20.

¹⁴⁴See footnote 104.

¹⁴⁵According to the chronicle of the Mezőkövesd house, the sisters left the internment camp without official permission and several of them tried to blend in with the local population, or with relatives. After a while, the police started to carry out searches for them in Mezőkövesd. Two sisters with the same family name, Mária Azária Gáspár and Mária Élia Gáspár, were mistaken for each other by a policeman, who began to follow Sister Élia on her way to her relatives after Mass. The terrified sister turned towards the cemetery, and when the policeman finally managed to identify her, it turned out that she was not the person he had been looking for. In the stress of the moment, and profoundly afraid of being killed, Sister Élia suffered a heart attack. Her brother found her in the cemetery, next to their mother's grave. She was still alive, but she was plagued by serious heart problems for the rest of her life. IMNNL box 32, item 46.



difficult traumas they had to cope with were losing the community, no longer wearing their monastic habits, and being harassed by the party-state. Some members of the community did manage to find a solution to the first of these problems. Living in a cell-like organization, they remained in contact with one another and with their superiors even while underground, thus preserving their community life and obedience. Those sisters who lived with their own families ultimately had to adapt to a secular life, yet they still strove to say their monastic prayers on a daily basis, keeping in mind the directive of Mother Superior Archangela, that this should “never be at the expense of the family.”¹⁴⁶ In the meantime, they also tried to maintain their role and duties as sisters in the local community, as an integral aspect of their identity: that is, they taught whenever they had the opportunity and took care of the children’s religious education. The success of these identity-preserving strategies is attested by the perceptions of “outside observers,” in our case the state security reports and the recollections of members of the local community.

In the case of most of the sisters who shared their recollections, the traumas they had experienced did not shake their faith or deter them from following their vocation. During their internment, many of them experienced a deeper religious commitment, and decades later they achieved a sense of peace, knowing that they had kept their vows. The recollections allow us to conclude that, after the orders had been dispersed, some members of the community kept their vows and continued in the religious life. However, some of the sources reviewed to date suggest that this was not always the case, and there were undoubtedly some who requested to be released from their vows and who opted for family life.¹⁴⁷ Further research is needed to clarify this question. The question of why certain sisters asked to be released from their vows merits further investigation, as does the question of how and why their identities were transformed in order for them to take this step.

In times of difficulty and suffering, even after the orders had been dispersed, the sisters often sensed that they were in the hands of Providence, and they remembered their ordeals with a sense of peace. The “virtual orders,” (BÖGRE 2021:43) which include the community of the Sisters of the Redeemer, survived for 40 years in dispersion, or in micro-communities, while dedicated superiors endeavored to keep the members of the order together. The underground network was therefore able to resurface after 1989 and begin a new, shared life, albeit with a somewhat reduced membership.

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¹⁴⁶Sister Mária Madleine Bódis (b. 1930). Budapest, November 3, 2022.

¹⁴⁷See footnote 1, and also, from the same source, the confession of Katalin Rétháti, who was arrested: “I told Andrea and her mother that I used to be a member of the ‘Daughters of the Divine Redeemer.’ My parents are no longer alive; I’m farming, that I’m not yet married.” ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-145725/1/64.



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