

Dr. Mózes Csoma

THE LEGEND OF ‘MAGYAR’ – A HUNGARIAN BOMB EXPERT AMONG THE KOREAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN THE EARLY 1920s¹

DOI: 10.35926/HDR.2025.2.2

ABSTRACT: *The Korean Peninsula commemorates the 80th anniversary of liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 2025. This anniversary makes a detailed investigation of a little-known legend relevant. According to a Korean patriotic book written in 1947, a Hungarian bomb expert provided assistance to Korean independence fighters in the 1920s. Based on the book, the person was a Hungarian prisoner of war during World War I in Russia, who later met a Korean independence activist in Mongolia and, at his persuasion, went to China, where he joined a Korean organization called Uiyoldan. This study attempts to investigate the truth behind the above legend and identify the mysterious ‘Magyar’ in the legend. The author collected and analyzed numerous archival sources to identify the wanted person.*

KEYWORDS: *Korea, Mongolia, China, independence fight, bomb factory, Hungarians, World War I, prisoners of war*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Mózes Csoma is a Koreanist scholar and former Hungarian Ambassador to Seoul (MTMT: 10031532).

INTRODUCTION

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule. The liberation was preceded by 35 years of brutal colonial rule between 1910 and 1945, which Koreans consider the lowest point in their history. It was only recently that the legend that a foreign bomb expert known as ‘Magyar’ was active among the Korean independence fighters in the early 1920s became widely known. The story came to light thanks to the South Korean movie *Milchong* (Age of the Shadows), which was screened in Seoul in 2016. The film features a Hungarian bomb expert who had been a prisoner of war during World War I in Russia, then moved to China, where the members of the Korean freedom fighters (the Uiyoldan organization) acquired a large number of explosives from him. The film is based on the activities of a famous Korean independence fighter, named Kim Won-bong (1898–1958?), about whom a Korean writer, named Park Tae-won (1909–1986), wrote a patriotic book after the Japanese colonial rule. Since both the writer and the main character of the book left for North Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War, uncovering the

¹ This study is an expanded, scholarly version of an article published on the Orient Projekt platform for the history of Hungarian–Asian relations. <https://doi.org/10.59608/pas2025a001.00>

identity of the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert is not an easy task. This study aims to uncover the real events behind the legend.²

KEY PERSONS OF THE LEGEND

The largest uprising against the Japanese colonial rule broke out in Seoul on March 1, 1919, which history books call the March 1st Movement. Although the Japanese authorities crushed the uprising that lasted for weeks, many Korean independence activists went abroad, where they began intensive organization for the liberation of their homeland.³ Many of them believed that the leaders of the independence movement had been too moderate and that more radical action was needed against the Japanese colonial rule. This goal was represented by the Uiyoldan organization, founded in 1919 in Jilin Province, Manchuria, led by Kim Won-bong. The independence fighter came from Miryang, Gyeongsang Province, and continued his early schooling in a *sodang*, a traditional Korean educational institution. Later, he continued his education in various modern schools, and his high school years coincided with the beginning of the Japanese colonial rule, which apparently contributed to his continuing his studies in China from 1916. During this time, he also learned German, which later enabled him to communicate with Europeans. In 1918, he enrolled at Nanjing University, but soon after, he trained at the Sinhyeong Military Academy, run by Korean émigrés.

The Uiyoldan organization sought to carry out targeted assassinations against individuals who maintained the colonial system, as well as targeted institutions and companies. Their goals included not only the liberation of Korea but also the elimination of social differences. Soon after the founding of the Uiyoldan, the organization's headquarters were moved from Jilin Province in Manchuria to Beijing, and prominent independence fighters, such as Kim Gu and Kim Gyu-sik, who were leaders of the Korean government-in-exile in Shanghai, and historian Shin Jae-ho, who was one of the main creators of modern Korean national identity, were active in the Uiyoldan environment.⁴

² The author would like to express his gratitude to the following persons: Prof. Dr. Sándor Szakály (Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Veritas Institute); Prof. Dr. Piotr Ostaszewski (former Ambassador of Poland to Seoul); Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi (HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities); Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Gábor Kiss (Vienna Branch of the Military History Archives); historian Bálint Juráczik.

³ Csoma 2018, 121–125.

⁴ Kim Gu (1876–1949): Korean politician, independence activist. Born in Haeju, in what is now the DPRK, he participated in pro-independence organizations from a young age and spent years in prison. In 1919, he participated in the March 1st Movement, then became a prominent leader of the Korean Provisional Government in exile in Shanghai, serving as its chairman in 1926–1927 and as its prime minister in 1930–1933. In the spring of 1948, he traveled to Pyongyang with a large political delegation to hold talks with Communist Party General Secretary Kim Il-sung on ending the division, but the meeting did not yield any real results. In 1949, he became the victim of an assassination attempt organized by the South Korean right wing. Kim Gyu-sik (1881–1950): Korean politician, independence activist. Born in Busan, he was initially educated by an American missionary. In 1897, he moved to the United States, where he attended Roanoke College and Princeton University. In 1919, he attended the Paris Peace Conference in an attempt to represent Korean interests. Kim Gyu-sik became a leading figure in the Provisional Korean Government in Shanghai, serving as its foreign minister. In 1948, he accompanied Kim Gu to North Korea to negotiate with Kim Il-sung to end the division. During the Korean War, he was taken north by communist troops and died near the Chinese border town of Manpo. Shin Jae-ho (1880–1936): Korean historian and independence activist. He studied at the Seonggyungwan Confucian Academy, but was forced into exile by the Japanese colonial rule. He organized the Korean independence movement in the Russian Far East and China. The patriotic historian was arrested by the Japanese authorities in 1928 and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. He died in prison in the eastern Chinese port city of Talien in 1936. A significant part of his legacy is kept in the so-called Great People's Studies Hall in Pyongyang, making it inaccessible to South Korean and foreign researchers.

During the initial operations of the Uiyoldan, the Japanese authorities arrested many Korean independence fighters, and the losses were too heavy for the achievements. Kim Won-bong thus decided that the fight had to be carried out differently, requiring ‘precise planning and perfect preparation’. He identified the Japanese Governor-General’s palace in Seoul as the target of the planned destruction, as well as the Chosun Bank, the Tongyang Company, the Seoul Electric Works, and the Seoul General Post Office, which were considered symbols of colonialism and capitalist oppression. He also planned to carry out bombing attacks on the Seoul–Pusan railway, the Seoul–Uiju line to the Chinese border, and the Seoul–Wonsan line to the east coast of present-day North Korea. According to the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* written by Park Tae-won in 1947, dozens of independence fighters were available to carry out the attacks, but they did not have the appropriate weapons. Kim Won-bong thus decided to procure very powerful explosives.⁵

At that time, there were several foreigners in Beijing who were skilled in the use of explosives, and Kim Won-bong selected three of them: an Italian, an Austrian, and a German. The latter made the best explosives, although he was not perfect either. Meanwhile, another foreign bomb expert, who was in Mongolia and is referred to in the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* as ‘Magyar’, came into Kim Won-bong’s sight.

However, before attempting to identify the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert, we must mention another key figure in the legend, Dr. Lee Tae-jun (1883–1921). Lee studied at Severance Medical School in Seoul, where he met the independence activist Ahn Chang-ho, who was recovering there.⁶ Lee was moved by Ahn’s courage and commitment, and later joined the independence movement himself. He decided to move his headquarters to China for the independence struggle, but at the suggestion of independence fighter Kim Gyu-sik, he went to Mongolia instead.⁷ The physician established a hospital in Mongolia and acted as a liaison to help Korean independence fighters get from Russia to China.



Figure 1 *Korean freedom fighter Kim Won-bong (1898–1958?)*

Source: *Public Commons*



Figure 2 *Korean writer Park Tae-won (1909–1986)*

Source: *Public Commons*

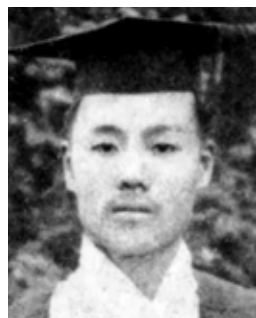


Figure 3 *Korean medical doctor and freedom fighter Dr. Lee Tae-jun (1883–1921)*

Source: *Public Commons*

⁵ Park 2015, 125–126.

⁶ Ahn Chang-ho (1878–1938): Korean independence activist. Born in what is now the DPRK, he studied in Seoul at a school run by Presbyterian missionaries. In 1902, he left for the United States with his wife, where they sought to unify the Korean colony. He returned to the Korean Peninsula several times. In 1919, he became a founding member of the Provisional Korean Government in Shanghai. He is one of the authors of the lyrics of the Korean national anthem.

⁷ Yang 2019, 155.

HUNGARIAN POWs IN SIBERIA AND THE HUNGARIAN BOMB FACTORY IN URGА

During the First World War, about half a million Hungarian soldiers were taken prisoners of war (POWs) in Russia, who were sent to various parts of the Tsarist Empire. Since the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert appeared in the sight of Korean independence fighters while in Mongolia, he was likely held in one of the POW camps in the Lake Baikal region. In 1917, the number of POWs in the possible camps was as follows: Krasnoyarsk 13,000; Achinsk 2,750; Kansk 6,000; Nizhny Novgorod 2,200; Irkutsk 8,800; Verkhne-Udinsk 8,500; Berezovka 27,500; Troitskosavsk 6,700; Chita 32,500; Streletsk 11,000; Nerchinsk 2,500; Dauriya 11,500 people.⁸

In the POW camps, the difference between officers and privates remained, and officers even received a monthly salary of 50–75 rubles. However, in the period following the October Revolution and with the outbreak of the Soviet-Russian Civil War, circumstances became increasingly unpredictable. The Hungarian press of the time often published desperate pleas for help from Hungarian prisoners of war languishing in the ‘red hell’ of Siberia, who wanted to get home to the Carpathian Basin. Detailed reports discussed the internal relations of Soviet Russia, which had fallen into anarchy, showing that it was unlikely that the Hungarians would be able to return to their homeland in any way.

“The country is dead. Nobody works. In addition to the unprecedented disorganization, in one governorate there is a famine, while in another border village there is great abundance. [...] There is also great anarchy due to the fact that in addition to the Romanov, Kerensky, and Soviet money – of which each city issued different denominations – there are a lot of large banknotes. Besides the 250 and 10,000 rubles, you can hardly see any change, although there are also postage and document stamps in circulation.”⁹

Many prisoners of war from the Lake Baikal region, hoping to escape the anarchic conditions and return home, headed for Mongolia, where conditions were also chaotic. The country was occupied by China in 1919, but at the end of 1920, as a sideline of the Soviet-Russian Civil War, the Asiatic Cavalry Division led by Baron Ungern-Sternberg invaded the country.¹⁰ From the perspective of our research, it is not negligible – and this is where the very important connections begin – that a group of Hungarian prisoners of war operated a bomb factory in Urga (now Ulaanbaatar) between December 1920 and February 1921. The account of this can be read in the memoirs of József Geleta (1895–1965), a former prisoner of war and later a researcher of Mongolia.¹¹

The young Hungarian man was taken prisoner of war by the Russians near Lemberg in 1916, and was imprisoned in Omsk and Krasnoyarsk.¹² In his memoirs, he describes in detail how he and his companions crossed the Russian–Mongolian border, which was also

⁸ Pach et al. (eds.) 1978, 107–108.

⁹ Mentsék meg lelünköt 1920, 2.

¹⁰ Roman Fyodorovich Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921): Tsarist Russian military officer, Mongolian warlord. A person of Estonian origin, he completed his military studies in St. Petersburg. From 1908, he served in Siberia, then participated in the battles of World War I in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. After the October Revolution, he became one of the important leaders of the White troops in the southeastern part of Siberia, but from the autumn of 1920, he acted as an independent warlord. After entering Mongolia, he acted as a military dictator, his followers mystified him and considered him the reincarnation of Genghis Khan. In 1921, he launched an attack against the Soviet Red Army, but after initial successes, the Reds captured and executed him.

¹¹ Forbáth 1934, 118–122.

¹² Hazájától távol 1987, 8.

crossed by smuggling gangs.¹³ Geleta arrived in the Mongolian capital just before November 1920, having already been in the city when Baron Ungern-Sternberg first attempted to besiege it.¹⁴ According to his description, Urga – occupied by the Chinese – was in great chaos, and it was feared that the baron's troops would once again besiege the city. Although Ungern's troops were pushed back by the Chinese, the civil war situation still persisted, and the young Hungarian had to find an income-generating activity. First, he and a few of his comrades organized a sausage factory, and then, at the instigation of the Chinese, they established a bomb factory. The main purpose of the latter was to produce mine-like explosive devices, with which they could block the roads around Urga, in order to prevent a possible new attack by Baron Ungern. Geleta, therefore, became a member of the bomb-making factory, where, according to his description, the first explosive device was made using the following method: a hole was drilled in a fired artillery shell casing large enough to fit a car spark plug, the casing was then filled with gunpowder, and the explosion was achieved with an electric current. The entire Chinese officer corps was present at the test explosion, and the demonstration was so successful that Geleta was commissioned to be the designer of the bombs.¹⁵

The Chinese planned to make the casings for the explosive devices in an iron foundry, but this was not immediately available. Geleta therefore suggested filling metal petrol cans with gunpowder, placing the spark plug in them, and then sealing the cans with a soldering iron. The Chinese supported the idea, and the Hungarian prisoner of war was lodged in a nicely furnished house, which he shared with some Chinese officers. There was also a workshop, where, in addition to the mines being made, 60 kilograms of dynamite were stored. According to the Hungarian man's recollections, they spent three days soldering the petrol cans filled with gunpowder, while they could have exploded at any time. A total of 40 mines were made using this method, which the Chinese immediately used to block the roads leading to Urga.¹⁶ The demonstration was very successful.¹⁷ Perhaps it was then that Dr. Lee Tae-jun learned about the high-quality explosives produced in the Hungarian bomb factory.

At this point, it is important to highlight one of József Geleta's comments: speaking about the bomb factory, he states in one place that several Hungarian prisoners of war worked on making the mines, and he managed to agree with the Chinese leadership that in case 200 explosive device casings were manufactured well in the iron foundry, the Chinese would transport all Hungarians to Beijing by car.¹⁸ It means that the Hungarians wanted to go to China, and Dr. Lee Tae-jun might have offered one of them to join the Uiyoldan organization, located in China.

However, developments turned out to be contrary to expectations. The primitive iron foundry did not meet expectations: instead of the metal, the bricks of the foundry melted. As a result, a decision was made to obtain fireproof bricks from the gold mine in Dzumodo (now Zuunmod), 40 kilometers from Urga. Since the first attempt to obtain bricks was unsuccessful, Geleta undertook to go to the scene himself with a Chinese escort. Shortly after

¹³ Forbáth 1934, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid 115–116.

¹⁵ Ibid 119–120.

¹⁶ Ibid 120–121.

¹⁷ Ibid 118–122.

¹⁸ Ibid 122.

Geleta left Urga, the siege of the city began, which ended in victory for the troops of Baron Ungern-Sternberg. The battle of Urga, as recorded in history books, took place between 1 and 4 February 1921, so Geleta could have left the city before 30 January.

Regarding Geleta's fate, it is necessary to mention that he learned in the gold mine in Dzumodo that the siege of Urga had begun. In the resulting chaos, he merged with the Chinese troops outside the city, who were fleeing towards the Russian border.¹⁹ The Hungarian prisoner of war later became a symbolic figure of Hungarian–Mongolian relations. Upon his return to Hungary, he became a popularizer of the culture of the Inner Asian country. As early as 1955, he gave a lecture to high school students about his experiences in Mongolia.²⁰

ALLEGATIONS ABOUT PARK TAE-WON'S BOOK

After the liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, shortly before he departed for North Korea, Korean writer Park Tae-won wrote his patriotic book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* (the name Yaksan refers to Kim Won-bong), which makes several claims about the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert. According to the book, the man was a Hungarian prisoner of war in Urga who did not have the money to return to Hungary. Doctor Lee Tae-jun met the man in Urga and promised Kim Won-bong, who was waiting in Beijing, that he would take the bomb expert from Urga to Beijing. Based on the book, Lee and 'Magyar' set off for Beijing, but before reaching the city of Zhangjiakou (Kalgan), they ran into 'Semyonov's soldiers' in the middle of the desert, which obviously refers to the troops of Baron Ungern-Sternberg. An officer named Kilchon recognized and shot Lee Tae-jun, who lost his life.²¹



Figure 4 The entrance of Dr. Lee Tae-jun's Memorial Park in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Source: photo by Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi

¹⁹ Forbáth 1934, 125.

²⁰ Beszámoló és filmvetítés Mongóliáról 1955, 6.

²¹ Park 2015, 130, 132.

Kim Won-bong was unable to contact ‘Magyar’ following the incident, but soon after, he heard some strange news in Beijing. The news was about a young foreign man, addressing Koreans in Beijing pubs and looking for Kim Won-bong. As a result, Kim sought out the foreigner, who was really the Hungarian bomb expert. According to the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan*, the Hungarian man ‘felt’ that he should meet the Korean revolutionary who needed technical help. Based on the book, Lee Tae-jun was absolutely right when he recommended ‘Magyar’ to Kim, as the Hungarian man was a great technician and a committed revolutionary, who had not come to Beijing in the hope of financial compensation, but wanted to help liberate Korea.²²



Figure 5 *Female Korean independence activist Hyon Gye-ok (1897–?)*

Source: *Public Commons*

Kim Won-bong and the bomb expert traveled from Beijing to Shanghai, where they acquired a European-style house through Kim’s lawyer friends. The house was registered in the name of ‘Magyar’, who set up his workshop in the basement of the building, and a man named Lee Dong-hwa was at his disposal for the production of explosives. Lee Dong-hwa had lived in Vladivostok for a long time and spoke good Russian, so they had no communication difficulties with the Hungarian technician. Lee was disguised as the house’s cook, which actually did not require much effort, because – based on the aforementioned book – he really enjoyed baking and cooking. A Korean woman, named Hyon Gye-ok, was also obtained for the Hungarian bomb expert. The woman was from Daegu, was a committed supporter of revolutionary goals, and spoke fluently in several foreign languages.²³ To outsiders, it must have looked like a European man living with a pretty Asian woman, and an Asian cook taking care of them.²⁴

They wanted to obtain the raw materials for the bombs from a Japanese merchant in the Japanese concession area of Shanghai, but this proved impossible, as he refused to sell such parts and raw materials to the Koreans. Kim Won-bong therefore obtained the necessary things through a Chinese comrade and also bought ten revolvers. However, the latter were all unusable, as they had bad springs essential for the mechanics. Eventually, the raw materials were obtained, so ‘Magyar’ and Lee Dong-hwa could begin working together in the basement of the house. Kim only visited them every two or three days so as not to arouse suspicion. According to the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan*, when Kim visited, the workshop table was full of cartridge cases, which shows similarities to the conditions at the Urga bomb factory described by Geleta. ‘Magyar’ was cheerful, often singing Hungarian songs. Meanwhile, the other seemed sad to Kim.²⁵

²² Park 2015, 133.

²³ Hyon Gye-ok (1897–?): female Korean independence activist. Born into a poor family, she became a kisaeng – the Korean equivalent of a geisha – at the age of seventeen. After the collapse of the March 1st Movement, she followed the independence fighters to Shanghai. She became a close associate of Kim Won-bong and played an important role in transporting explosives. In 1928, she went to the Soviet Union and studied in Moscow. Her later fate is unknown.

²⁴ Park 2015, 134.

²⁵ Ibid 135–136.

After about two months, Kim Won-bong left the technician and his Korean assistant, and traveled to Beijing to consult with his comrades. Kim then held personal discussions with historian Shin Jae-ho, an important member of the Korean independence movement, whom he asked to write a Revolutionary Declaration for the Uiyoldan organization. Kim also invited the historian to travel with him to Shanghai and see the bomb-making process and where the bombs were tested. Shin accepted the invitation. According to the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan*, Kim and ‘Magyar’ sailed out to sea one morning with three or four ‘comrades’ and then carried out the test explosions on a small island 50 *ri* far from Shanghai. Three types of bombs were tested: those designed for assassinations, those designed to destroy buildings, and those designed to cause fires. The island was inhabited only by fishermen who had no contact with mainland civilization, so the independence fighters did not have to worry about their activities being discovered. The test explosions were successful; the bombs assembled by the Hungarian technician worked perfectly.²⁶

These are the claims in Park Tae-won’s book. The Uiyoldan organization acquired well-functioning bombs; however, they failed to achieve a breakthrough. The new explosive devices were smuggled into the occupied Korean peninsula by members of the Uiyoldan organization. In September 1921, independence fighter Kim Ik-sang detonated a bomb in the Colonial Government Building in Seoul, damaging part of the building. In January 1923, an independence fighter named Kim Sang-ok detonated a bomb in the Chongro district police station in downtown Seoul. It should be noted that there were also many internal conflicts within the Uiyoldan organization, with several members of the leadership – including Kim Won-bong – believing that the struggle for independence should be directed in a different direction, instead of less-impactful bomb detonations. All this contributed to the fact that in 1928, the Uiyoldan took a leftist turn and issued a document emphasizing cooperation with the Soviet Union, the so-called world revolution, and class struggle. However, this direction was also opposed by anarchists within the group, as well as nationalists who espoused non-communist principles; thus, the Uiyoldan essentially ceased to exist.

HUNGARIAN POWS WITH EXCELLENT TECHNICAL SKILLS

First of all, we must state that the only evidence of the existence of the wanted person is Park Tae-won’s patriotic book; we have no other concrete source claiming that ‘Magyar’ really existed. The explanation for this is that the person in question practically worked as a bomb manufacturer in cooperation with the Uiyoldan organization, and he is indirectly responsible for the assassinations carried out by the organization. Obviously, no one likes to report on such activities unless the change in the political environment renders the actions more acceptable. Since the legend of the bomb expert ‘Magyar’ did not spread in either Hungary or North Korea after World War II, two possibilities can be concluded about him: 1, the person died before the end of World War II, so he did not have the opportunity to regard his previous activities as glorious in the changed political environment; 2, the person did not return to Hungary after World War II, but continued his life by keeping his former actions as a deep secret. The latter may also explain why Kim Won-bong – who later became Minister of Labor in North Korea – made no attempt to track down his old comrade-in-arms.

²⁶ Park 2015, 139–140.

We must continue to identify the person with two filter conditions. First of all, the Hungarian prisoner of war who was able to produce high-quality bombs had to have some technical training. Secondly, the person's location and route must have matched the conditions outlined in Park Tae-won's book. According to our current information, two Hungarian prisoners of war arrived in Beijing from Mongolia – that is, from the site of the Hungarian bomb factory in Urga – and both had technical knowledge.

One of them was Reserve Lieutenant Tibold Kregczy (1889–1959), who graduated as a mechanical engineer from the Budapest University of Technology and then worked as an engineer in the ironworks in Resicabánya.²⁷ That was the iron and steel metallurgy center of Hungary at the time, where 45 thousand tons of pig iron were produced annually. As mentioned above, in the Urga bomb factory, Hungarian prisoners of war began building a primitive ironworks to make the castings needed for explosive devices.²⁸ Although all the above information could support the possibility that Tibold Kregczy is the searched person, he arrived in Shanghai before Dr. Lee Tae-jun's death in February 1921, and according to a later letter, he had been there since November 1920.²⁹ Therefore, it seems he is not the person being sought.³⁰

However, another Hungarian person who fits the search criteria appears in the reports of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai. The young man was a technician named Gábor Magyar, who first appeared in the documents of the Dutch legation in Beijing. This means that he was previously in Mongolia, because the prisoners of war in the Lake Baikal region were all able to reach Beijing only through the Gobi Desert, and those around Khabarovsk and Vladivostok were transported directly by ships to Shanghai. We do not know exactly when Gábor Magyar arrived in Beijing, but the Dutch legation issued him a passport in February 1922, with which he traveled to Shanghai.³¹ If Gábor Magyar is



Figure 6 Hungarian engineer Tibold Kregczy, who was also in Mongolia and Shanghai, but it seems he is not the person wanted

Source: Hungarian National Archives, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.



Figure 7 Hungarian mechanic Gábor Magyar, who seems to be the person behind the legend of the mysterious 'Magyar'

Source: Hungarian National Archives, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

²⁷ Tibold Kregczy's qualification sheet 1952, 5.

²⁸ Forbáth 1934, 122.

²⁹ Bestätigung, written on January 23, 1922. Documents of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai, which protect the interests of Hungarians, 1917–1940. 1. cs. HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

³⁰ Very little information is available on Tibold Kregczy's later activities: he established a soda water factory in Shanghai and then an oil refinery. He ended the latter activity in 1946 and then left for Calcutta. Source: Chwaściński, B.: *Z dziejów taternictwa*, Sport i turystyka, Warszawa, 1979, 147.

³¹ Temporary passport for Gábor Magyar issued on February 6, 1922. Documents of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai, which protect the interests of Hungarians, 1917–1940. 1. cs. HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

the person we are looking for, this means that he went from the Chinese capital to Shanghai with Kim Won-bong, where they began operating the bomb factory. The young man had a technical education; various documents from the Dutch legation mention him as a technician or engineer. Furthermore, and here comes a significant detail, the man's family name is 'Magyar', which explains why the Korean patriotic book uses the word 'Magyar' to refer to him instead of 'Hyungari', which is what Koreans used at the time.

Gábor Magyar, therefore, probably arrived in Shanghai in early 1922, but at the end of the same year, an unexpected event occurred. The young man applied for a Chinese domestic passport at the Dutch Consulate General in Shanghai, not to leave the country, but to travel back to Beijing. According to the archive document, he wanted to travel to the northern Zhili (now Hebei) province "in connection with his engineering activities".³² The question arises as to whether he intended to travel to the Korean Peninsula via Beijing with members of the Uiyoldan organization.

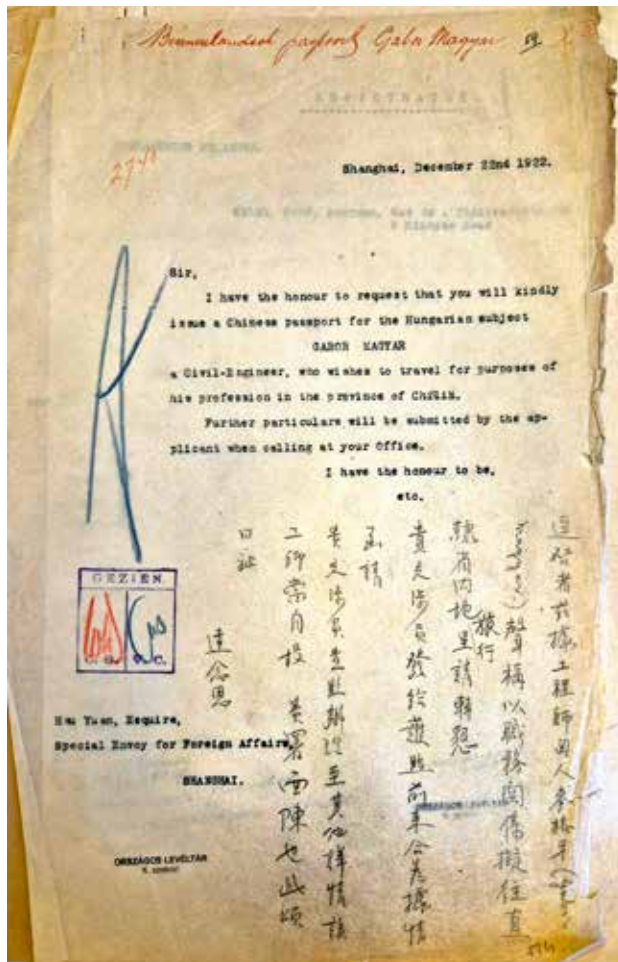


Figure 8 Gábor Magyar's request for a Chinese domestic passport in December 1922 to travel back from Shanghai to Beijing "due to his engineering activities"

Source: Hungarian National Archives, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

³² Letter to Hsu Yuan, written on December 22, 1922. Documents of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai, which protect the interests of Hungarians, 1917–1940. 1. cs. HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

Three weeks later, in January 1923, the Uiyoldan organization carried out a successful bombing in colonial Korea. As mentioned above, an independence fighter named Kim Sang-ok detonated a bomb in the Chongro district police station in downtown Seoul. Although Kim Sang-ok successfully went into hiding, five days later, the Japanese police found his hideout and launched a manhunt to capture him. Kim first fled to Namsan Mountain and then barricaded himself in a house in Hyocha district. A few days later, hundreds of policemen surrounded the building, and Kim Sang-ok committed suicide.

THE REAL PERSON BEHIND THE LEGEND

It seems that Gábor Magyar matches all the filters in the search. According to his birth certificate preserved in the archives, Gábor Magyar (full name Gábor József Magyar) was born in Selmechánya in 1896. During this research, I have not found any records regarding his military service in World War I, but it appears that he served with the Austro-Hungarian 44th Infantry Regiment. Based on his younger sister's later account, he was taken prisoner by the Russians in 1915 or 1916.³³ Details of Gábor Magyar's activities are, of course, not revealed in the documents preserved by the Dutch Consulate General in Shanghai. His only autobiography, written decades later in Shanghai for official purposes, shows that he was a machine gunner with the rank of platoon leader during World War I. He was sent to the POW camp in Troitskosavsk and then escaped to Mongolia.³⁴ We have only very limited information about his later life: in the summer of 1929, he married a Russian widow living in Shanghai and began his peaceful civilian life.³⁵ A year and a half later, in December 1930, a Hungarian prisoner of war named Tibor Parragh returned home from Shanghai and reported to Hungarian journalists that there were still many former Hungarian prisoners of war in Shanghai, among whom was the mechanic Gábor Magyar.³⁶ According to the newspaper article, briefly reporting on the Hungarians who remained in Shanghai, Gábor Magyar sent greetings to his younger sister, Zsófia Magyar, who was living in Budapest at the time. Following the news report, in March 1931, the Budapest police summoned the woman, who worked as a dental assistant, for questioning.³⁷ In the police report, the woman stated that she had been receiving letters from her brother sometimes, who was working as a mechanic in various factories in Shanghai. The address of his brother was the following: 125 Boone Rd., Shanghai.³⁸ The remaining documents of the Hungarian Legation in Tokyo reveal that the man became a pillar member of the Hungarian colony in Shanghai, working as a successful engineer for various companies. When Japanese troops occupied the inter-

³³ Record of the Budapest headquarters of the Royal Hungarian State Police on the interrogation of Zsófia Magyar on March 12, 1931. K 73 T12-HF-M-974.

³⁴ The only known autobiography of Gábor Magyar, written on April 15, 1943. MNL-OL-K 103 Hungarian Legation in Tokyo, 1939–1944.

³⁵ Marriage documents of Gábor Magyar and Klavdia Georgievna. Issued on July 27, 1929. Documents of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai, which protect the interests of Hungarians, 1917–1940. 1. cs. HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

³⁶ Tizenöt év után hazajött egy magyar hadifogoly és üzenetet hozott a Kínában élő magyar hadifoglyokról, 1930, 13.

³⁷ Record of the Budapest headquarters of the Royal Hungarian State Police on the interrogation of Zsófia Magyar on March 12, 1931. K 73 T12-HF-M-974.

³⁸ Record of the Budapest headquarters of the Royal Hungarian State Police on the interrogation of Zsófia Magyar on March 12, 1931. K 73 T12-HF-M-974.

national part of Shanghai during World War II, Gábor Magyar once had a serious conflict with the Japanese military authorities, though it seems that this incident had no relation to his probable past.³⁹

As mentioned above, after the liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, Kim Won-bong left for the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, where he became an important member of the communist regime. However, there is no evidence that Kim ever told the staff of the Hungarian mission in Pyongyang, established in April 1950, that he had worked with a Hungarian bomb expert during the 'Shanghai days'. Kim later served as the DPRK's Minister of Labor, and in early April 1955, he personally visited Hungary as part of a North Korean delegation that participated in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the liberation from the German occupation. Prior to the trip, Hungarian ambassador to Pyongyang Pál Szarvas invited the members of the delegation to a dinner, which took place on March 21, 1955, at 7 p.m. The dinner was attended by Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik, Kim Won-bong, and Hungarian Ambassador to Budapest Ahn Yong, who was currently in Pyongyang. As a practicing diplomat, the writer of these lines knows perfectly well that anecdotes proving the friendship and connection between the two faraway nations are usually discussed at such dinners, but – according to a foreign affairs note kept in the Hungarian National Archives – during the conversation, Kim Won-bong did not say a single word about his former Hungarian acquaintance. Although the similarities in the history of the Korean and Hungarian peoples and the parallels in the structure of the two languages were discussed, it was Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik who spoke, while Kim Won-bong remained silent.⁴⁰

The delegation finally left Pyongyang two days later on a scheduled flight, arriving in Budapest almost a week later, on April 1, 1955.⁴¹ As the press of the time reveals, delegations from all socialist countries also attended the reception of the Soviet embassy in Budapest in addition to the state celebrations; the summary of the party newspaper *Szabad Nép* mentioned that Kim Won-bong attended the event not only in his ministerial capacity, but also as the leader of the People's Republic Party of the North Korean state.⁴² However, in contemporary articles and foreign affairs records, there is not a single remark on Kim Won-bong mentioning his former Hungarian comrade-in-arms.

NOT A HAPPY ENDING

– THE FATE OF KIM WON-BONG AND PARK TAE-WON

An important question is why Kim Won-bong never mentioned his former Hungarian comrade-in-arms during his stay in Hungary. If 'Magyar' had died during the anti-Japanese struggle, perhaps during World War II, then Kim Won-bong could have proudly mentioned him as a martyr of the joint fight. It is much more likely that the former bomb expert's activities and possibly his lifestyle made him unworthy of ever being mentioned by Kim, who was deeply committed to the communist ideology. The reason for becoming unworthy could also be as simple as the fact that 'Magyar' later started a business venture, which thus turned him into an exploitative capitalist in Kim's eyes.

³⁹ Official Record. Written in the office of the Hungarian Association on August 7, 1942, at 10 a.m. MNL-OL-K 103 Hungarian Legation in Tokyo, 1939–1944.

⁴⁰ Report of Ambassador Pál Szarvas on March 24, 1955. MNL XIX-J-14 Box 6 50-159.

⁴¹ Elutazott a koreai kormányküldöttség 1955, 1.

⁴² Fogadás a szovjet nagykövetségen a Szovjetunió kormányküldöttségének tiszteletére 1955, 1.

The North Korean government delegation left Hungary on April 9, 1955.⁴³ As the report of the Hungarian mission in Pyongyang shows, the delegation arrived in Pyongyang on April 16, 1955, on a scheduled flight, and the charge d'affaires of the Hungarian embassy hosted a dinner in their honor shortly afterwards. The meeting provided an opportunity to share experiences and impressions gained in Hungary. Although this time, Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik spoke the most, praising the standard of living and culture of the Hungarian people, eventually, Kim Won-bong also had the floor. However, the Minister of Labor spoke only about the great influence that Hungarian factories and their social institutions, such as the resorts, had had on him. Kim added that he had learned a lot and hoped that he would be able to use what he had seen in the Korean environment. Based on the report, Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik then intervened, saying that Kim would be obliged to use what he had seen. The report said Choe Chang-ik's remark was 'half-joking', but it also points to the fault lines that were emerging in the DPRK leadership at the time.⁴⁴ The vice premier was removed from power in the fall of 1956 for 'factional behavior' and later executed; Kim was caught up in internal purges in 1958, and the exact circumstances of his death are unknown.

At this time, Gábor Magyar was already dead. According to archival documents, the man traveled to Europe with his passport issued in Shanghai in April 1949. At the end of 1949, he applied for an entry visa at the consulate of Brazil in Naples. His Russian-born wife, Klavdia, accompanied him on the trip.⁴⁵ It should not be overlooked that the couple left Shanghai when the outcome of the Chinese Civil War had already become clear, or, to simplify it, they fled to South America from communism. This again provides an indirect explanation for why the relationship between 'Magyar' and Kim Won-bong, who was deeply committed to the communist idea, was severed. The Hungarian man and his Russian-born wife finally received their entry visas to Brazil in Naples in January 1950. However, the couple did not enjoy the surroundings in South America for long: Gábor Magyar died in Rio de Janeiro during an operation in December 1953, and his remains were laid to rest in the cemetery of Petropolis.⁴⁶ The man's widow traveled to the United States in January 1956, where she settled in San Pedro, California. The woman outlived her husband by a long way, dying in October 1971, and her remains were buried in Indianapolis.⁴⁷

Finally, the question may arise as to what the situation is with the writer Park Tae-won, whose book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* is the primary source regarding the existence of 'Magyar'. Why did Park Tae-won, who also left for North Korea in 1950, not talk about this 'Hungarian aspect' to the staff of the Hungarian embassy in Pyongyang? The reason for this is to be found in North Korea's internal circumstances: during the Korean War, there was apparently

⁴³ Elutazott a koreai kormányküldöttség 1955, 1.

⁴⁴ Report of charge d'affaires Dr. László Keresztes on April 20, 1955. MNL XIX-J-14 Box 6 50-159.

⁴⁵ "Rio de Janeiro, Brazil records," images, FamilySearch (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95B9-9GKN?view=index: June 5, 2025), image 28 of 203; Arquivo Nacional de Brasil (Rio de Janeiro), Image Group Number: 004915887 familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95B9-9GKN?view=index Thanks to Bálint Jurászik for the data.

⁴⁶ "Rio de Janeiro, Brazil records," images, FamilySearch (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G5YW-LM6?view=index: June 6, 2025), image 54 of 203; Arquivo Nacional de Brasil (Rio de Janeiro), Image Group Number: 004910461 familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G5YW-LM6?view=index Thanks to Bálint Jurászik for the data.

⁴⁷ Klavdia Magyar: United States, Index to Alien Case Files, 1940–2003. 10488106. Thanks to Bálint Jurászik for the data.

no real opportunity for relation-building, and then, as a result of the show trials against communists of South Korean origin, Park Tae-won was sent to agricultural work. Between 1955 and 1960, he worked in an agricultural cooperative in the Kangso region of South Pyongan Province, and during his absence, the main character of his book, Kim Won-bong, was also subjected to internal purges. Although Park's health deteriorated, he later returned to the literary life of the DPRK, becoming the country's recognized historical novelist. However, at the time, it was obviously not appropriate to remember the book that featured the relationship between Kim Won-bong, who had been removed from power, and the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert.

PUBLISHED SOURCES

- Csoma, Mózes: *Korea története – a két koreai állam történelemszemléletének összehasonlításával*. Antall József Tudásközpont, Budapest, 2018.
- Forbáth, László: *A megújódott Mongolia*. Franklin Társulat, Budapest, 1934.
- Pach, Zsigmond Pál – Okladnyikov, A. P. – Alekszejev, A. V. – Józsa, Antal (eds.): *Magyar internacionalisták Szibériában és a Távol-Keleten, 1917–1922*. Kossuth Publishing House, Budapest, 1978.
- Park, Tae-won: *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan*. Seoul: Kiphunsem, 2015.
- Yang, Ji-son: *Honggariin 'Majaru'wa hanguk tongripundong*. (The Hungarian person 'Majaru' and the Korean independence movement.) In: *Hangukkva Honggari tongripundongi kiokkva kyocha*. (The memory and intersection of the independence movement of Korea and Hungary.) Dankook University, Yongin, 2019, 147–180.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

- *Beszámoló és filmvetítés Mongóliáról*. Dunántúli Napló, March 13, 1955, 6.
- *Elutazott a koreai kormányküldöttség*. Szabad Nép, April 10, 1955, 1.
- *Fogadás a szovjet nagykövetségen a Szovjetunió kormányküldöttségének tiszteletére*. Szabad Nép, April 2, 1955, 1.
- *Hazájától távol*. Brassói Lapok, July 17, 1987, 8.
- *Mentsék meg lelkünket*. Az Est, February 4, 1920, 2.
- *Tizenöt év után hazajött egy magyar hadifogoly és üzenetet hozott a Kínában élő magyar hadifoglyokról*. Pesti Napló, December 23, 1930, 13.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES FROM THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL ARCHIVES

- Documents of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai, which protect the interests of Hungarians, 1917–1940. 1. cs. HU-MNL-OL-K 672.
- Official Record. Written in the office of the Hungarian Association on August 7, 1942, at 10 a.m. MNL-OL-K 103 Hungarian Legation in Tokyo, 1939–1944.
- Record of the Budapest headquarters of the Royal Hungarian State Police on the interrogation of Zsófia Magyar on March 12, 1931. K 73 T12-HF-M-974.
- Report of Ambassador Pál Szarvas on March 24, 1955. MNL XIX-J-14 Box 6 50-159.

- Report of charge d'affaires Dr. László Keresztes on April 20, 1955. MNL XIX-J-14 Box 6 50-159.
- The only known autobiography of Gábor Magyar, written on April 15, 1943. MNL-OL-K 103 Hungarian Legation in Tokyo, 1939–1944.

ARCHIVAL SOURCE FROM THE HUNGARIAN MILITARY HISTORY ARCHIVES

- *Tibold Kregczy's qualification sheet*. HM HIM HL AKVI 1952, 5.

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

- “Rio de Janeiro, Brazil records,” images, FamilySearch (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95B9-9GKN?view=index: June 5, 2025), image 28 of 203; Arquivo Nacional de Brasil (Rio de Janeiro), Image Group Number: 004915887 familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95B9-9GKN?view=index
- “Rio de Janeiro, Brazil records,” images, FamilySearch (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G5YW-LM6?view=index: June 6, 2025), image 54 of 203; Arquivo Nacional de Brasil (Rio de Janeiro), Image Group Number: 004910461 familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G5YW-LM6?view=index
- Klavdia Magyar. United States, Index to Alien Case Files, 1940–2003. 10488106.