

PRISON MEMOIRS

by Wendelin Endrédy, Abbot of Zirc (+1981)

INTRODUCTION

ABBOT WENDELIN Endrédy was incarcerated from October 29, 1950 until November 1, 1956, when he was liberated by the Freedom Fighters of the short-lived Hungarian Revolution. After the defeat of the revolution he was returned to prison for a few months, but then his incarceration was changed to internment in the Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma, Hungary's only monastery that was not suppressed by the Communists. The tortures he underwent and the six years of solitary confinement thereafter had seriously damaged his health. Yet he lived for 23 more years in relatively comfortable confinement. He was visited in the 70's not only by many of the monks of Dallas but also by a good number of Prep School students traveling with their Form Masters in Europe. He was never allowed to see his monastery again, although it lay only 30 miles from his place of confinement. He died in 1981. Only then when he was allowed to return home did the government finally allow his burial in the abbatial church of Zirc.

His prison memoirs had surfaced one year after the demise of Communism. They had been deposited with his nephew who is mentioned at the end of the document. They were published in Hungary in the monthly magazine *Vigilia*. Originally written for Hungarian readers, the document needed some editing. I tried to keep the translation as faithful to the original as possible, but inserted footnotes and subtitles. It is a document of faith "shining in the darkness" and as such, echoes well the passage read over and over in the Christmas season, the Prologue of St. John's Gospel: "the light shone in the darkness and the darkness was unable to overpower it."

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FOREWARNINGS

AS THE Abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Zirc in Hungary, at the end of November, 1948, I made an official trip to Rome. My passport was issued only with difficulties, after repeated petitions and months of delay. Msgr. László Bánáss, the bishop of my diocese, and Mr. Joseph Cavallier, still a minister in the government, had to guarantee that I would return. While in Rome, I received a letter from Leopold Baranyai, a director of the European Bank in London. Quoting reliable English sources, he informed me of the following: Moscow had ordered the Hungarian government to arrest Cardinal Mindszenty on Christmas, then to imprison five other Catholic church leaders, of whom only I was known by name. Accordingly, I had to count on being arrested as soon as I returned to Hungary. In Rome, the acting Secretary of State, Msgr.

Tardini told me that he received similar information from a different source. He asked me if I intended to return home. “Yes,” I answered. Because the Holy Father¹ did not bring up the question at my audience, I assumed that he was in agreement with my decision. Since to both Msgr. László Bánáss and Mr. Joseph Cavallier I guaranteed that I would return, I went back home on time.

On my return, guards searched my belongings at the border and took away the personal letters entrusted to me in Italy. They were so well informed that they knew in which of my pockets I had which letter. I could, however, retain all documents given to me at the Vatican. I left all letters and documents issued by the Vatican with Msgr. Kálmán Papp, the bishop of Győr. From there the bishop’s chauffeur took me to Esztergom to give an account of my trip to Cardinal Mindszenty. He was already under house arrest: at the door of the Cardinal archbishop’s palace a policeman stood guard. Yet he did not prevent me from entering. However, as I left the Cardinal’s house, guards searched the car, including its trunk and the space under the seats. Did they think I was trying to organize the Cardinal’s escape by hiding him in the car? To Card. Mindszenty I reported on my audiences in Rome, and transmitted a message sent by the Pope. I gave him the Vatican’s decree dispensing the members of the religious orders from their vows of poverty and obedience (in case of dispersion). Each person was given permission to acquire money and use his salary according to his best judgment, but with the obligation, of course, of helping the needy and elderly members. I kept the original copy which contained remarks and corrections in the Pope’s own hand and sent a copy to the superior of each religious order.

About Leopold Baranyai’s letter I spoke to archbishop Joseph Grösz. My supposition was that he, as well as Bishop Shvoy of Székesfehérvár, Bishop Pétery of Vác and the provincial of the Jesuits, Fr. Elmer Csávossy, were targeted for imprisonment. Archbishop Grösz memorized the text of the letter verbatim; Fr. Csávossy did the same. After our arrest, all the three of us recited for the authorities the text of this letter word by word to prove that our imprisonment was part of a plot. The officials leading the interrogations began to scream at us, “How can you imagine that citizens in a sovereign country would be arrested at the order of a foreign power?” But maybe our action has saved Bishop Shvoy from imprisonment and possibly also Bishop Pétery, for he was never formally arrested or imprisoned. They only interned him to the village of Hejce.

Before my arrest there were some other incidents. On July 14, 1950, they searched my rooms in Zirc, going through all my belongings. Three plainclothes policemen showed up. They did not bring a search warrant, they only showed their secret police identity cards. In my office, one sat at my desk and examined every document on the desk with the most careful attention. During that time the other two examined each book on my shelves. They were especially interested

¹ Pope Pius XII.

in new books with uncut pages and the bindings of the books. In the middle of the table there was an envelope, still open, containing a letter which I was planning to send to Rome. I think they were looking for that letter, but as it often happens, they did not notice this item which was placed in the most conspicuous location. They went through the upholstery of the furniture, threw all my clothes out of the closet. As I later found out, in my room of our residence in Budapest they even stripped the wooden paneling off the walls, searching for hidden letters.

The letter on the table was a petition to the Holy See, asking that Fr. Richard Horváth, a Cistercian who had collaborated with the Communists, be removed from our Order. Before writing that petition, I asked him why he was not following my orders. He only answered: "I dare not tell you why." Fr. Richard was not a bad person. I am sure he was not the one who denounced me for writing the letter in question but someone to whom he had to report our conversation.

A week after this event the police searched the Accounting Office of the Abbey of Zirc as well as the files of the Business Office and sealed every room of both offices.

While I was in Rome, the housekeeper in charge of the monastery's kitchen, Miss Hedvig Sch--, was detained and brought to the main police station in Budapest. They interrogated her at length about the personal and financial conditions of the Abbey. They wanted to know who was visiting me and what the relationship between the members of the Order and our employees was. She was also tortured. They put objects with a cutting edge between her fingers, pressing them together. In spite of all this she had not accused us of anything.

At about the same time one of the finest craftsmen in Zirc was beaten half-dead at the police station. They forced him to sign a confession according to which I had induced him to engage in espionage and had received a payment in American dollars. It was from that money that he had been able to build his new two-story house.

From these terrible events as well as from Mr. Baranyai's letter, I was able to anticipate what was awaiting me. Card. Mindszenty's arrest on Dec 26, 1948, had, however, generated a great deal of international outrage. Because of this reaction, the arrest of other church leaders, as well as my own, were delayed.

THE ARREST

ON OCT 29, 1950, I was on my way from my nephew's home to Budapest. In the evening hours we had just reached the outskirts of the city; my secretary, Fr. Timothy Losonczy was driving. All of a sudden an automobile cut in front of us, another blocked us from behind. In each car four plainclothes secret policemen sat. Their leader approached me with the arrest

paper. "Could I say goodbye to my secretary?" I asked. "No, he is also coming with us," was the reply. As I was later told, Fr. Timothy endured his destiny very courageously. He was in prison for four years. He died before I could see him again.

They took me to the infamous secret police station at No. 60 Andr ssy Street. The interrogation lasted eighteen hours with two short pauses. In the pauses they lit my face with high-powered lamps; two policemen saw to it that I would not close my eyes even for a minute.

The head of the Bureau of Investigation, whose name I never learned, told me that I had been under surveillance for two years and that they had followed every one of my steps. They had obtained irrefutable evidence about my criminal activities against the State. They told me that they intended to prove my crimes of organizing a conspiracy against the State, of espionage and of illegal dealings with foreign currency. They accused me of sending abroad twenty-four young members of the Order and of exhorting the Order to remain faithful to the Church even after Zirc had been suppressed. By doing this, they said, I wanted to weaken the power of the State and the new democratic regime. At the first interrogation they did not accuse me of conspiring to restore the Hapsburg monarchy, nor did they accuse me of anti-Semitism. These absurdities were invented later.

In the second hour of the interrogation, the colonel indignantly declared how insolent the hearsay was about the tortures done by the secret police. They would not even touch anybody. They had no intention of making a martyr of me. He gave his word "as a gentleman" to confirm all this. At this time, indeed, I could not even imagine that somebody of my age - I was 56 years old at the time - would be repeatedly beaten, kicked, tortured in all sorts of ways, and then given shots with chemicals that would deprive him of his free will.

They spent an awful lot of time telling me all sorts of slander about the personal lives of our bishops, the superiors of the religious orders and of other leading personalities of the Church. They declared who my lover was and made detailed statements about the sexual liaisons of the various bishops. That was followed by a long and detailed list of deviant sexual behavior attributed to these same persons.

They, in fact, did not want to turn me into a martyr. To the contrary, they wanted to destroy my personality and turn me into a demoralized, humiliated non-person. They made no secret of their intent. I was told how they planned to make the press in Hungary and abroad become a participant in this Satanic comedy.

I received 72 hours to "think it over." After that, if I would not cooperate, they would publish all those "facts" of which they had accused me. They would destroy not only my image but also the image of the Cistercian Order and the Church as a whole.

“I need not one minute of reflection,” I said. “There is nothing to think over.”

At the end of my first interrogation they accompanied me to the basement. On an ice-cold pavement floor, they stripped me naked: they wanted to see if I was hiding any items. They tore off the lining of my jacket, they broke off the sole of my shoe, they took off its heel. They took away my shirt buttons, my suspenders, even my eyeglasses. In the prison cell there was only an incredibly dirty bunk bed. In the first two months I received no blanket. Later I got the kind of cover that one normally uses for horses. In the room the light was always on. Only the noise coming from the street enabled me to distinguish between night and day. I was expected to sit on the bunk bed without leaning back; only with permission was I allowed to lie down. I was expected to keep my hands outside the blanket. In my sleep I had to turn my head away from the wall, facing the light.

THE ACCUSATIONS

THE TWO trips which I made abroad in 1948 were used against me as evidence for espionage and high treason. I was told that the real head of the Church was Wall Street, that the Pope was in its service. It seemed to be important for them to state that the religious orders were the blindest instruments of the Vatican and therefore each religious man or woman was under suspicion of being an agent. They did not say that all spies were Jesuits but that all Jesuits were spies. They gave me a long list of Hungarian priests living abroad and wanted information about them.

I was told repeatedly that according to Moscow I was an especially dangerous agent of espionage. They knew that through the cultural attaché of the Italian Embassy I corresponded with Fr. Blaise Füz, a Hungarian Cistercian living in Rome. I suspected, indeed, that my activities were closely followed. Just six months before my arrest, I learned that in Vienna, Austria, a Russian soldier approached Béla Lehrmeyer, a former employee of the Archdiocese of Kalocsa offering him, for 500 dollars, one of my letters, that had been confiscated from a diplomatic messenger. This was a letter which I had, indeed, written shortly before the incident, and sent to Fr. Blaise, through the Italian Embassy of Hungary.² I was therefore aware that the secret police knew, at least partially, of the letters which I sent abroad through diplomatic channels. During the ensuing interrogations I had been time and again struck by the evidence that even my most confidential letters and the replies received for them were known to the secret police. But what did these really contain? I wrote about the life of our Order in Hungary, our work and our difficulties, the confiscation of our monasteries and institutions, the deportation and

² At the time of Abbot Wendelin's arrest, the Eastern portion of Austria was still under Soviet occupation and Vienna was divided into four "sectors" (British, American, French and Soviet). For the sake of obtaining Western currency, Russian soldiers stationed in Vienna--and thus freely cruising throughout the three "Western sectors"--often engaged in offering for sale documents which they had intercepted in the line of duty. Abbot Wendelin was notified before his arrest by the person he names in his memoirs that some of his letters had been indeed intercepted and put up for sale.

internment of the monks as well as the various roadblocks set up by the government, impeding our pastoral and educational activities. From 1950 I informed the authorities in Rome also about what was happening to other religious orders. After July of 1950, as the suppression of religious life began and our monks were deported from the monasteries, I informed the Vatican authorities about the meetings and conferences which state officials began with certain members of the episcopacy.

One of my “crimes” was the fact that after the war, through Fr. Julius Hagyó-Kovács, O. Cist., I had notified the American Mission in Budapest about the list of items (industrial and agricultural goods and machinery, means of transportation and other valuables) which were forcibly taken from our possession by the Soviet Army. I tried to explain that with this move I intended to lessen the amount of restitution Hungary was supposed to pay the Allied Forces. My interrogator simply replied that I was acting out of hatred for the Soviet Union.

My contacts with the officials of the British and American embassies were termed acts of espionage. In vain did I argue that I was in possession of no military or industrial secrets and consequently could not have informed them about such matters. I had no inkling that my letters sent abroad, informing our friends and the superiors of our Order about the Abbey, our schools, the enrollment of our schools or the social break-down of our student body could be regarded as “crimes of espionage.” Even my interrogators must have felt that these accusations were, in fact, bordering on the ridiculous. For later, when preparing me for my trial, they gave strict orders that if I would be asked about any of these “crimes,” in my replies I must avoid such matters. “If that jack-ass judge would ask you such stupid questions, you must do a snow job,” I was told.

They interrogated me at great length about the “Americana,” the Catholic Youth Organization for University students, founded and run by Cistercians. They accused me of trying to restore Hapsburg rule in Hungary, of supporting Admiral Horthy and of anti-Semitism. What was their proof? They claimed that two Jewish boys were beaten up by University students. But what did I have to do with all these matters?

One of the main points brought up against me was my “political activity.” As they formulated it, I had actively participated in Cardinal Mindszenty’s efforts to overturn the regime by counter-revolution.

In fact, my anticipations about the future were quite different. For about one year before my arrest, István Friedrich, a former prime minister of Hungary, visited with me in Budapest. By then an elderly man, he asked my help in finding a housekeeper and a nurse for himself. In the course of our conversation he informed me that soon there would be radical political changes and Hungary would become part of the Western world. He said that the Western powers had

contacted him to lead the future government. I told him in all honesty that I found his predictions impossible. Maybe in decades such changes could take place but in the given situation his political predictions appeared totally unrealistic. Yet the secret police insisted that I had participated in efforts to form a new government by instigating an uprising.

Another proof of my activities against the regime was the general attitude of the Cistercian monks who, joining the Jesuits, forcefully protested against the suppression of the religious orders. In fact, in those years the Jesuits and the Cistercians became very close to each other because the members of each Order took a unified stand. They made a vigorous impression on the country, each clinging to its own particular spirituality. I was also accused for the way the community of Zirc helped the nuns who were deported there and crowded into our buildings in August of 1950.³ Indeed the monks in Zirc exhorted the nuns not to consider themselves “suppressed” but to keep their unity and loyalty to their Orders. The regime was surely disturbed by the unified stand taken by these different religious communities.

By the way, I was shocked to realize that the secret police were fully informed about every word that was spoken at the meetings of the religious superiors of the country. Their spy net was working.

It was also considered as one of my crimes that I visited in prison those of my monks who had been arrested before me: Frs. Julius H., Fr. Thomas F.,⁴ Fr. Gerard M., Fr. Clement P., and also some others outside the Order. My visits were considered a demonstration of sympathy for the enemies of the regime and an expression of hatred for socialism.

They wanted to obtain from me a confession that I had played a major role in organizing illegal student groups with the purpose of toppling the regime. It turned out later that the desire to obtain a confession of this kind was their main reason for applying tortures during my interrogations. The factual basis to this accusation was rather thin. A Cistercian alumnus, one of my former students named Ervin Papp, was involved in such anti-Communist activities. Before my arrest I learned about his plans and made an effort to dissuade him by explaining that, in our political situation, any such attempt would be doomed to failure and dangerous. I gave him this advice in a letter, asking him to destroy it upon reading. Unfortunately, he did

³ Before the complete suppression of the religious orders was forced upon the Hungarian church, the majority of the country's religious men and women were interned into the largest church facilities. In this way several hundred religious women from all over Hungary were transported to Zirc on trucks and left there with no provision for food and lodging. With many of them sick and elderly, the Cistercians living in the Abbey (about ninety persons, of whom almost sixty were in their twenties) were under extreme pressure to provide for these guests forced upon them. Every available room and most hallways were transformed into living quarters. While the town of Zirc was generously feeding the interned nuns, the priests of the community offered spiritual help to the dispossessed women living in the anxieties of an uncertain future.

⁴ Fr. Thomas Fehér was arrested in 1948 and was kept in jail. When he was released by a judge's order, but only temporarily, he managed to escape from Hungary. He eventually came to Texas and lived in the monastery of Irving until his death. He taught in the Cistercian Prep School 1963-1976.

not follow my request. At his arrest, my letter fell into the hands of the police. In spite of the letter's content arguing against any subversive activity, the letter was used as proof of my involvement in conspiracy.

TORTURE

MY FIRST torture took place in an elegant room. They stripped me naked. Then facing a young officer I was forced to begin deep knee bends. Every time I bent down, I was forced to kiss his boots. This went on till, exhausted, I collapsed. Meanwhile I was supposed to answer questions. After I had passed out a few times, I was brought to a cell in the basement. I spent two weeks in a little prison cell that looked like a burial cave of 2 by 1.3 meters (7 ft by 5 ft). Above the bunk bed there was a leaking sewage line, constantly dripping on me. I was not allowed to lie down. However, while sitting I was still able to catch some sleep. I got no blanket. It was November. I was constantly cold. In these terrible days I was constantly praying to God to make me die so that I would not hurt anyone by what I might say.

Two weeks later the interrogations continued. Behind a huge desk sat a colonel, probably the head of the Office of Investigation. They made me sit in front of him, while I was surrounded by five or six plainclothes policemen. To the side three people, two majors and a captain, sat on a leather couch. The interrogation focused exclusively on the conspiracy of the university students. I told them again that I had participated in no such thing. (At that time I did not know as yet that, disregarding my advice, Ervin Papp had indeed started a subversive organization.) The detectives spat into my face. The colonel asked them, "Do you know any other way than torture to break a man's resistance." They all said, "No." They then dragged me to the other room where I had been tortured the first time. The same three people were waiting for me: a huge, muscular major, a captain and another man in civilian clothes.

They stripped me again and made me do exercises till I collapsed. Meanwhile with some flat object they dealt immense blows from behind on my shoulder. For three weeks after this I could not move my head. They also kept on kicking my lower back. The blows and kicks did not cause acute pain but time and again I was knocked unconscious. Yet I do not think I ever remained unconscious for any longer period of time. I kept on concentrating on what to say and tried to answer all the questions which they were asking. For if I remained silent and did not deny any of their statements, they took my silence as an admission of guilt.

I had to undergo a large variety of physical trials. They made me face the wall and forced me to lean onto a pencil-like object set between my forehead and the wall. They put nails and needles under my heels. They pushed against my side the heated plates of electric ranges. When I collapsed they quickly pulled out the plank with the nails and needles and with a few kicks forced me to stand up again.

Another method was to make me squat time and again. They put into my hand weights of 20 to 30 pounds. I was supposed to squat with my heels over the nails until I collapsed. Then again with blows and kicks they brought me back to consciousness.

I was also tortured with electric shocks. They conducted electricity to my lips, around my eyes, my nose, my ears, even to my penis.

The game of “Kiss the Cross” consisted in forcing me to kiss a metal cross and a metal plate, the latter being called the “gospel book.” The electric circuit was closed every time I held the plate and kissed it. They said if I told the truth no harm would be done, but if I lie the electric shock would kill me. My lips were burned and a wound as big as a quarter was left on my mouth. As I collapsed a sharp object lying on the floor seriously wounded my knee. This wound became infected and swelled up as large as my palm. They brought two doctors who dressed and bandaged the wound with the greatest care. One of them asked: “What happened to you?” I softly answered, “It happened during the interrogation...” At that moment a policeman stepped out from behind a screen and harshly interrupted, “He fell down on the steps.”

During the tortures there was a point beyond which I ceased to feel that I was being hit. At times the prison guard would tell me to wipe the blood from my face. I did not realize that I was bleeding.

WRITING MY “CONFESSION”

AFTER TWO sleepless weeks, when my knees were bruised and infected, they took me into a dirty little room. They called it the “writing room.” Here the prisoners had to write their biographies and confessions, admitting all the charges. I was very tired, I just fell on a bed stained by blood and puss. A male nurse entered with a syringe in his hand. He said that the doctor sent him and I would get a shot more effective than any sleeping pill. He gave me two shots. In ten minutes I began to feel funny. In this altered state of mind, which I cannot describe, I was led to another hearing that lasted for the whole night. These were the most painful hours of my life. I had to concentrate all my strength in order to keep my mind and will under control. Obviously, they injected into my system some mind-altering drug. But I was able to keep my mind in control. And yet, besides the horrors, up to this day I could not and cannot recall the details of that terrible night. I cannot recall what questions I was asked.

Six months later I was brought to confront Ervin Papp. As I realized that he was, indeed, organizing a conspiracy, I stated, “I was in no way part of this but, in case, by accepting some part of his guilt, I could help Papp and his fellow-defendants, I am willing to cooperate.” This remark was never included in the minutes of my process.

After eight months of such experiences, I was brought to court. Mr. Vilmos Olti was the judge, the prosecutor was Julius Alapi.⁵ The whole procedure was utter comedy. I received detailed instructions about what to say in court. I was warned that if an attorney asks me a question which is not in the script, I am not supposed to reply. I was accused of high treason, espionage, conspiracy and illegal handling of foreign currency. My sentence was made public June 28, 1951. I was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

LIFE IN PRISON

AFTER SENTENCING they put me into a car with screened windows. They drove around for more than two hours while I was sitting between two armed prison guards. I thought I was transported to the city of Szeged, but as it turned out they carried me only to another prison in Budapest, about 10 minutes from the courthouse.

For almost three years I lived in this prison, the prison of Konti Street. I was in utter solitude, never meeting anyone. I was one of the so-called "secret prisoners." As I learned later, there were two other such prisoners there: Msgr. Grösz, the archbishop of Kalocsa,⁶ and the former Socialist leader, Arpád Szakasits.⁷ In this prison the guards made me suffer a great deal. Often they did not let me out to the restroom. For hours I was in extreme pain. My cell was filthy, my skin was infected in the dirty cell, three times my face was disfigured by such infections. They fed me with bread made of flour gone bad. But during the winter they heated rather well. Each pair of cells had a common stove.

The day after my arrest I petitioned that I be allowed to say mass. First at Christmas of 1950 then at Easter of 1951 I was given permission to celebrate mass. But only from May 3, 1951, Ascension Thursday, did I receive a chance to say mass daily. They brought to my cell a chalice broken at its handle (I had to fix it with a piece of string) and a Franciscan mass book. Through five and a half years I was able to celebrate mass each day. At Christmas and All Souls'

⁵ Both Olti and Alapi played the corresponding roles in Cardinal Mindszenty's show trial. Alapi, a former Catholic lawyer of high reputation, committed suicide a few years later. Six years later, in 1956, Olti was still an active judge, but by then he was said to be an alcoholic, losing his skills for conducting showcase trials. As a law student I once saw him holding trial. Then also he was dealing with a political prisoner. He must have "messed up" on his script for he allowed the defendant to exclaim, "But how could I tell you about my interrogations by the police, since I lost consciousness under the beatings?" We, the law students in attendance, reacted in an uproar of indignation. He called us to order, but back at the university a big discussion followed about what we had witnessed. The revolution of 1956-- to break out in five months--was already in the making.

⁶ As the second ranking prelate of the Catholic Church in Hungary, soon after the arrest of Card. Mindszenty, Archbishop Grösz was forced to sign a document in 1950 in which he recognized the suppression of the religious orders of the country. But soon after he was also arrested, tried and sentenced. Set free in the 1960's, he died soon afterwards.

⁷ Arpád Szakasits had a role somewhat similar to that of Archbishop Grösz. Being the leader of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party in 1949, he was forced to sign the "voluntary union" of the Social Democrats with the Communists. After being President of the Republic for a short time, he was arrested, tried and sentenced for high treason. He was released in the 60's and died soon thereafter.

Day I said three masses. At the beginning they tried to mock me while I was saying mass. But when they saw that I was not paying attention to them, they stopped. From the beginning of my imprisonment I asked for an opportunity to go to confession. I sent letters to the Ministry of Justice with this request but never received an answer. Otherwise I did everything to stay busy, keep my mind occupied. Whatever was beautiful in my life, I tried to recall over and over. In this way God's grace had been doubled in my soul and comforted me in my prison life.

On August 7, 1953, the feast of St. Cajetan, I had my first chance to go out for a walk. One round in the courtyard took 68 steps. I was allowed 12 rounds. Later, my walks were made longer. In the prison to which I was later transferred, I was allowed to walk twice a day. There I was able to stay in the sun, sometimes even to sit down. In 1954 or 1955, in the summer, I ventured to stop, admiring a little piece of weed. The guard urged me in a rude voice: keep on walking!

For the first eight months of my imprisonment I received no books, no paper and pencil or pen. After my sentencing I received numbered sheets of paper, the guards repeatedly checked what I was writing down. I was solving math problems and made notes of the books I was given to read. The prison library consisted mostly of Soviet authors. I read Gorky, Ilya Ehrenburg and others. The rest of the books were atheistic, hateful toward church and clergy and showing employers in the worst light. A few days before my sentencing, I was offered a chance to request other books. I asked for a Bible, the book Canon Law for Religious Orders, and a book on math or physics. The first two titles were immediately rejected, a book on math and physics was delivered into my hands five years later, on November 1, 1956, the day of my liberation by the freedom fighters. But two months after my trial I received the four volumes of the Breviary. And right after sentencing they gave me a rosary, though not my own.

Throughout the prison years I had to get up at 5:30 AM. The routine consisted of washing, dressing and cleaning the cells. Breakfast was given at 8 AM. In the first years, for breakfast they gave us soup cooked with shortening and flower, later they switched to the black coffee used by the military.⁸ They gave each day 300 grams of bread (2/3 of a pound), in three allotments. Lunch was given at 12 noon; it consisted of soup (made of canned vegetables) and about half a liter of some cooked vegetables. Once a week 100 grams of boiled meat was offered; on Saturday and Sunday the dinner was cold cuts. At 9 PM we had to go to bed. But in the year of 1956 my food was identical with that of the prison personnel. In my first prison (Konti Street) I was given a numbered metal bowl and a spoon with the same number on it. The number was 201. When they moved me to another prison, the bowl and the spoon accompanied me so that

⁸ In military service, black coffee was made of the cicoria plant. According to persistent rumor, known to all of us who served in the Hungarian People's Army, prisoners and draftees were given sedatives in the daily coffee. The bitterness of this coffee substitute could successfully hide the taste of any drug.

I would not attempt sending any message of my whereabouts in the way customary among political prisoners.⁹

Right after my arrest there was no heating in the cells in which I stayed, only the hallways were kept warm and from there we received some heat. By the way, underground cells are usually not very cold, only extremely dirty and stinking. The Konti-Street prison was adequately warm. But in Vác, my next prison where I spent almost two years, there was no heating whatsoever. It was there that each finger on both my hands, three toes on my right foot and two on the left as well as my left ear were frozen.

I was otherwise never seriously sick, but I went through the usual prisoner illnesses. I struggled with infections of the digestive system, lack of vitamin C, my teeth became loose, many broke or fell out. I had problems with my sense of balance (inner ear), deficiencies of the heart and sleeplessness. But my nerves did not give up and I preserved my sense of humor. I was able to rejoice seeing a small bunch of weeds pushing its leaves up in the prison court. I have put its leaves into my breviary; I still keep them.

When I was sick with those “prison illnesses,” doctors of the secret police came to take care of me; their behavior and treatment was impeccable. To such secret prisoners as me, the regular prison doctors were not allowed.

The prison cells of the secret police and the restrooms were horribly dirty. They did not clean them, nor did they give cleaning instruments for us to clean them. It was only in the prison on Konti Street that I got for the first time a separate towel, a piece of soap, a wash bowl. There I could treat the floor with oil and keep it cleaner. In the prison of Vác there were countless bedbugs in my cell. On the first three days after my arrival, May 13, 1954, I killed 750 of them. Later I got some DDT in powder and I was able to get rid of them all. In other prisons I found no bugs.

It was like a blessing to get from Vác to my last prison, the Central Prison in Budapest. It happened on Good Friday, March 30, 1956. They placed me in the same cell in which, as I later learned, Cardinal Mindszenty had spent quite some time. Although I was still isolated from everyone, life became much more bearable. I was given paper, pencil and books to read.

About the attitude of my guards working for the secret police, I have already spoken. In the prison on Konti Street they at times turned on the lights 30 times during a single night so that the prisoner would not have a chance to sleep. It was most terrible to hear them blaspheme

⁹ By marking their utensils prisoners sometimes succeeded in sending messages about their being alive. Abbot Wendelin's whereabouts were unknown to his community for years. His mother died without ever getting a chance to visit him or to learn where he was.

the name of God, the Lord Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the context of incredible obscenities. But I met some more humane guards even at the worst places.

I had a cellmate only during the first months of my imprisonment, while preparing for the trial. I thought, at first, that they were snitches working for the police. My first companion came in January of 1951, he was a former general of the Army. He greeted me with the words: "Please don't tell a thing about yourself." I thought from this that he cannot be an agent. Later a captain of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then another colonel of the Army, an engineer, were my companions. But for the next six years I was completely alone.

Throughout these years I had one single visit. Three months before being set free, my brother's son was allowed to see me. We were allowed to speak to each other for half an hour. It was from him that I learned that on January 16, my mother had died. It was at that time that I also learned about the death of a member of our Abbey, Fr. Justin Baranyai. It hurt me so much to learn that in the prison he had lost his mind and never recovered, even after he had been set free.

When I was freed, my original clothes in which I had been arrested could not be found. They only found my watch tied to shoelaces; they returned my abbatial ring and a clergy suite.

My life of six years in prison is an asset which I would not exchange for any earthly treasure. By all this, my life was enriched by an incredible extra value. I feel no anger against any person who tortured me.

FREEDOM IN SIGHT

ON NOVEMBER 1, 1956, a guard opened my cell. Three men in civilian clothes entered with the greeting that sounded like a dream: "Praised be Jesus Christ! The Most Reverend Abbot of Zirc is free!"

It was about 6 PM as I exited from the Central Prison. I was the last prisoner to leave - the last one, because my name could not be found on any list of inmates.

THE LAST PAGES OF ABBOT WENDELIN'S PRISON MEMOIRS

A Summary

ISPENT a total of six years in prison as a "secret prisoner," kept in anonymity in uninterrupted loneliness, without any work or occupation. Of these six years, eight months were spent in custody of the secret police with on-going interrogations, twice with physical torture. By these

methods, they “proved” me guilty of crimes I never committed: high treason, espionage, counter-revolutionary conspiracy, possession of foreign currency. The last one of these was true.

They would have pardoned my crimes if I had accepted the role of testifying as a chief witness, with a signed statement, to the immoral lives of the Hungarian bishops and religious superiors, including my own. Since I refused to accept my role as a witness in such a “satanic comedy,” they limited their “proofs” to my personal life. After the mockery of a so-called trial, played out in detail in the presence of a five-member team under the presidency of judge Olti, I was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

I have never seen the text of the sentence and, in spite of my repeated requests, I have never received it.

Until the trial I was kept in three locations, all three in Budapest: # 60 of Andrassy Street [today a museum called The House of Terror,], Main Street in Buda and Marko Street in Pest. My imprisonment continued in three more places: on Konti Street, Budapest, in the state Prison of Vác and in the “Gathering Prison” of Budapest. Let me make my reader feel the weight of 6 years in exact numbers: 6 years and three days are equal to:

72 months and 3 days

or 315 weeks

or 2195 days

or 53,040 hours

or 3,682,400 minutes

Each second of this time I was in an environment in which I felt overpowered in my whole being, by two rather different yet all-consuming ways:

The first method was that of the secret police, which in a thoroughly diabolical way tried to destroy me physically and morally. The apparatus of the juridical organization only added to it by choreographing a “satanic comedy,” as it had been determined by their bosses in Moscow.

The second method was my life in prison, where my personhood was simply abolished and I was handled as a mere physical object. An object is deaf, mute and blind. A prisoner is not supposed to see or hear or speak. The experience of prison weighed on me as if I was entombed alive. I felt almost physically that shackles kept in bondage all my physical senses. I was never

allowed to be in contact with my natural family or my brothers in the Order. I received no letter or parcel for six entire years.

It was three days before my liberation [by the Revolution] that I was allowed to speak to my nephew. For three years I was not allowed to go for a walk. For almost two years I lived in an unheated prison cell in which my fingers and my toes and also my left ear suffered frostbite.

I encountered physical filth and dirt so incredibly bad that most human beings would not be able to imagine it. I lived in a prison cell in which, during one night, I killed hundreds of bed bugs as they invaded my body. Three times I was treated for life threatening infections of my legs and once for another skin disease, all caused by filth.

My only source of consolation and strength was the Eucharistic sacrifice which I offered in a prisoner's uniform at those times when I was allowed to do so. No bell rang; only my heart was singing about the Lord's mysterious presence on the table of the prison cell. He became my companion—my mysterious and only cellmate—amidst the desert of my life in prison. He heard each one of my sighs and groanings, He wiped away every tear from my eyes, by which I expressed my desire for my dear Cistercian brethren and other loved ones: "Will I ever see them again? Will I ever again embrace those to whom I spiritually belong, those who are mine and whose father I am, as well as my many relatives?"

Yet unexpectedly, one day the door was opened and I was able to walk again on this Hungarian soil upon which the Freedom Fighters' blood was shed, and I was again able to go home to my monastic family, all scattered but most of them still alive! Ever since I started living with them again, the prayer we say every morning is so much more meaningful: "Make us worthy to be free..."

RETROSPECT

I AM not yet able to make a closure and move on. My thoughts repeatedly return to the prison; I relive each of its scenes time and again. I cannot help it. The prison transforms a human being in some fundamental way. The first thing I tell myself in retrospect is that for no earthly treasure would I give away the sufferings of these six years. I was given an immense amount of gifts. I finished an education, graduated and now I hold a diploma on which it stands written: an improved human being.

I would have been a bad student of physics if I had not seen in my prison-life a basic law of modern atomic physics proven: "All matter is ultimately light." Today even voice can be pictured. Even that is light. We pick up a few grams of dust from the ground, we may precisely measure and calculate the energy its atomic particles could release. It has been proven that a city

like Budapest with more than a million inhabitants could be provided with light and heating from the energy contained in a small amount of matter.

Thus, the second conclusion I come to is this: every piece of trash, no matter how riff-raff and valueless it is, can become light, eternal light, if God's Sun shines on it and releases it from the burden of the horror of evil. This is why I am unable to feel hatred toward those who have hurt me, those who tormented me. I hate none of these evil men. I like to pray for them from the bottom of my heart, asking that they may convert and become good human beings.

With this I think I can come to a closure and finish all that I was able to tell about my six years spent in prison.