

Finding a Home: Hungarian Cistercian Refugee's Journey to Irving, Texas

by Ryan Bigney

Hundreds of churchgoers filled the wooden pews of the small stone church to celebrate mass on Christmas Eve. Abbot Peter Verhalen, a man in his late fifties who was ordained a priest thirty-five years ago, presided over the service, preaching about hope, something he saw as central to this Christian feast of Jesus' birth. Fr. Verhalen was elected Abbot of Our Lady of Dallas, a Cistercian monastery in Irving, in February of 2011. He is the first American born monk/priest to be elected abbot of this small abbey in Irving. As such, his election marks the culmination of a series of events which began over sixty years ago half-way across the globe, when members of the Cistercian Order in Hungary fled their native homeland. Why would these Hungarian men, members of one of the most historic and respected monasteries in central Europe, leave? And how did they end up in Texas? - a place unlike Hungary in most every way imaginable.

This paper asserts that these Cistercians, were forced to leave Hungary during the Communist occupation and suppression of religious orders in the 1950s. They settled in Irving, Texas in order to assist with the building and foundation of the University of Dallas only after years of dissatisfaction with life in Spring Bank, Wisconsin. It was there the Cistercians found their first American "home" that fulfilled their desire to live out their vocation as educators, priests and monks.

This paper makes use of many primary resources, including articles from *Salve Regina*, a magazine/newsletter written for the first decade of the monastery's existence (the 1960s). Many of the articles in *Salve Regina* are written anonymously. Another invaluable primary source of information is the so-called *Historia Domus*, ("The History of the House") a meticulously kept historical record detailing the first forty years of the monastery's history. The work is unpublished; it is kept in two three-ring binders in the Abbot's office. No author is given for the work, but according to the Abbot

of the Monastery, Fr. Peter Verhalen, the work was completed by two of the monastery's historians: Fr. Louis Lékai and Fr. Bede Lackner. Articles written in the 1950s and 1960s from the *Texas Catholic*, a newspaper written for the Catholics in the Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth, provide an outsider's account of the monastery's history.

The story of the Cistercians in Texas begins with the aftermath of the Second World War, in which Hungary was left in the hands of the Soviet Red Army.¹ After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, nations in Eastern Europe hoped the Soviet grip over their country might be loosening and a few tried to reform their nation into a more liberalized state. In Hungary these changes occurred under the leadership of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister, whose transformations included giving more freedom to peasant farmers, the release and amnesty of political prisoners and the abolition of a few labor camps.² In 1956 Hungarian revolutionaries started what historian John Lewis Gaddis calls "a full-scale rebellion, not just against their own communists, but against the Soviet Union itself."³ The guerilla style fighting in the streets of the Hungarian capital of Budapest caused the Soviet army to retreat for a couple days – leading some to believe they had won freedom for their country and they might be allowed to leave the Warsaw Pact.⁴

Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khurshev, however, responded by ordering the troops to re-enter Hungary with the intention to squash the rebellion. Gaddis, the pre-eminent Cold War historian, writes in his aptly titled book *The Cold War*, "This they promptly did, but not before some 1,500 Soviet soldiers and 20,000 Hungarians had been killed."⁵ Imre Nagy, who as

¹ Hungary fought most of WWII as an ally of Germany. In October of 1944, however, it fell under German control following an attempt to switch sides in the war. In January 1945, a provisional government concluded an armistice with the Soviet Union and established the Allied Control Commission, under which Soviet, American, and British representatives held complete sovereignty over the country. The Commission's chairman was a member of Stalin's inner circle and exercised absolute control. Over the next few years the Communist Party had consolidated power and ran the country with little resistance from the other Allied powers. - Superintendent of Documents. 2005. "Background Note: Hungary." *Background Notes On Countries Of The World: Republic Of Hungary* 1-16. History Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed May 16, 2014).

² Marta Shaff, *The Uprising of 1956*, History Reference Center (2009).

³ John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 108.

⁴ The Warsaw Pact, officially the "Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation, and Mutual Assistance," was a defense treaty among eight communist states from Central and Eastern Europe. In many ways it was the Communist response to NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – which was a collective defense treaty for democratic and capitalistic western countries. It was signed in May of 1955 and went into extinction in July of 1991. Its informal name, The Warsaw Pact, is due to the location of its headquarters – Warsaw, Poland.

⁵ Marta Schaff, in her article for the History Research Center, writes about these same casualties with slightly different numbers: "When the Soviets left on November 4th, 25,000 Hungarians were

premier had reluctantly led the rebel regime, was arrested and later executed. Hundreds of thousands of other Hungarians who survived tried desperately to escape to the West.”⁶ Included in those fleeing the country were dozens of Hungarian Cistercian monks – men who felt their lives were in danger due to their work as priests and monks.

The Cistercian Order is a religious order of monks and nuns in the Roman Catholic Church. It was founded in the late eleventh century (c. 1098) and currently has monasteries around the world. While each monastery has a certain amount of freedom to seek out its own way of living, all members of the order follow some common features: a black and white habit, a life of prayer and work (*ora et labora*) and are spirituality influenced by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the most important of the Cistercian Fathers and one of the most influential men of Medieval Christendom.⁷

St. Bernard’s monastery, Clairvaux, was located in France. It, however, became so popular that Bernard started to send monks throughout the rest of Europe to organize and found other monasteries. In 1182, twenty years after the death of Bernard, these monks came to Hungary and established the first Cistercian monasteries in the country. By the beginning of WWII the Cistercian monasteries in Hungary were experiencing quite a bit of growth. They had developed several religious houses throughout the country, established five secondary schools where they taught hundreds of students, and had established residential colleges for university students.

At the end of the war Hungary was in disarray: the capital was destroyed, the economy was in serious danger and most of the farms were unproductive. The Soviets took much of the Order’s property and redistributed it to poor farmers. Many of the monks, and other members of the Catholic Church, saw this land redistribution in a positive light and in line with the message of Jesus: a way to help the poor. Furthermore, most people thought the Russians would be out of Hungary within a year.⁸

dead, 20,000 were imprisoned, and 200,000 had fled to the West. Another 2,000 of the imprisoned were later executed.”

⁶ Gaddis, *Cold War*, 109.

⁷ *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, an encyclopedia of sorts for basic information about many popular saints of the Catholic Church, writes about St. Bernard: “Born to nobility near Dijon, France, Bernard became a major influence in twelfth-century Christianity... When he became a Cistercian monk in 1112, he is reported to have brought four of his brothers and about thirty of his friends with him... An outstanding speaker and writer, with an astonishing command of sacred Scripture, Bernard was popular throughout Western Europe. People in positions of sacred and secular authority sought his counsel.” 192; For more information on Bernard, see Bruno S. James whose work on Bernard is very well received.

⁸ Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 24.

This was not to be. Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy, who was Abbot of Our Lady of Dallas for over 20 years, writes, "In the next three years life in Hungary became increasingly more difficult for everybody, but especially for the clergy and religious."⁹ The Cistercian Order in Hungary had been a center of learning, education and culture, according to a historical article "Cistercians Move to Dallas" in a 1955 issue of their magazine *Salve Regina*. "The order was supported in its educational, cultural and charitable work neither by the government nor the people of any fund-raising organizations. It owned about 50,000 acres of arable land and 10,000 acres of forest, mostly timber."¹⁰

Two events altered life in a dramatic way for the Cistercians in Hungary. First, during the 1947-48 school year, all religious schools in Hungary (including Catholic, Protestant and Jewish schools) were nationalized. All five Cistercian schools became the property of, and began to be operated by, the Hungarian State. Secondly, in 1950 religious orders throughout the country were disbanded. The property owned by monks and nuns was taken away and its members were forced to leave. The Abbey of Zirc, the main Cistercian Abbey located near Budapest, was suppressed, the land and buildings were seized and the religious order was outlawed; all 214 monks living there were scattered. In the words of Farkasfalvy, "The worst possible scenario had become a reality."¹¹

The Cistercians realized they could not stay in Hungary. The Communist presence made their life impossible. The suppression of Zirc, the political dangers that followed, and eventually the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 caused forty-two Cistercians to leave home and head for the United States. If one looks at the numbers provided by Fr. Louis Lékai, a Hungarian Cistercian whose work as a historian and record keeper was central to my research, he would see that some of the monks left even before 1950, when Zirc was suppressed.

The plan to explore opportunities in the United States, in fact, began shortly after the arrival of the Red Army in 1945. Lékai wrote a letter, dated July 19, 1945, to his friend and fellow Cistercian Fr. Anselm Nagy in which he describes a plan he's formulated to explore "the new world." The letter ends dramatically with the line, "I do not want to exaggerate, but one may say that the survival of our community depends on our readiness to work with dedication and diligence."¹² This correspondence was "the first known

⁹ Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 26.

¹⁰ "Cistercians Move to Dallas," *Salve Regina* (1955), 13.

¹¹ Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 26.

¹² As quoted in Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 25.

document about the project that resulted in the foundation of a Cistercian monastery in the United States by Hungarian monks.”¹³

The *Historia Domus*, an internal history added to yearly from the late 1950s, typed on yellowed paper and kept in two black three-ring binders, records this trip undertaken by Nagy:

Our first two Fathers, Raymond Molnar and Anselm Nagy, commissioned by Abbot Vendel Endredy¹⁴ of Zirc, arrived at the United States early in 1946. After a few months of orientation they settled down at the Cistercian monastery of Our Lady of Spring Bank.¹⁵

Our Lady of Spring Bank was a Cistercian monastery in central Wisconsin. Its origins, struggles and ultimately tragic end would be a topic worthy of its own paper, but is beyond the scope of this project. The Hungarian Cistercians thought they could arrive in Wisconsin and take over this struggling little monastery, helping themselves and the monks already living there. This plan for Spring Bank, in the mind of those in Zirc, was threefold: firstly, a new foundation would add to the prestige of the Abbey; secondly, once up and running again, it would provide a source of financial assistance both to the monastery back in Hungary and to Spring Bank which had been struggling since bad investments made during its foundation; and thirdly a place for refugees fleeing Hungary. It became none of these. Farkasfalvy describes it as a “quagmire.” Spring Bank, he said, was “an operation which solves no problems but instead creates new ones and leaves the participants with the sense that there is no way out.”¹⁶

Life at Spring Bank was difficult for these first Cistercians. They had arrived with highly professional teaching degrees, but found the English language very difficult to master. The *Historia Domus* records that over the next few years more Cistercian monks from Hungary arrived. “With them grew the desire to continue the life and traditions of Zirc in the field of education. Unfortunately, Spring Bank did not present possibilities for such an activity.”¹⁷ In Spring Bank the monks were expected to farm and perform

¹³ Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 25.

¹⁴ Two important notes about this line: First, “Abbot Vendel Endredy” is also known as Abbot Wendelin Endrédy, the abbot of Zirc who spent years imprisoned. His memoirs serve as a powerful witness to those who see him as a spiritual father. Secondly, monks take a vow of stability that requires them to remain in the same monastery their entire life. To undertake an exploratory mission to search for a new home would typically be seen by other monks as breaking this vow; however, the permission of the abbot, as mentioned here, would sanction such a mission in the eyes of all monks.

¹⁵ *Historia Domus*, (self-published), 1.

¹⁶ Farkasfalvy, *Cistercians in Texas*, 27.

¹⁷ *Historia Domus*, 1.

other tasks of menial labor – this was the only work available in Wisconsin where there was no school or university to run. Soon they started to search for other opportunities.

Demonstrating his prophetic skills once again, Fr. Lékai recognized as early as 1949 (even before Zirc was suppressed and Hungarians were set to arrive in the US in larger numbers) that Spring Bank would not work for the new foundation. In his article for the American Catholic Historical Society, Lékai writes that he and Nagy “spent three weeks on the road visiting nineteen dioceses in the western and southwestern states.”¹⁸ They were searching for a diocese¹⁹ that would be open to receiving a new religious foundation that combined priestly ministry with education at the high school or university level. Over the next few years Lékai and others investigated opportunities in both San Diego and Buffalo, New York. Both appeared to be exactly what they were looking for, only to realize major investments or financial difficulties stood in the way.

In Texas since 1953, Fr. George Ferenczy, a Cistercian from the Abbey of Zirc, had studied music at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls and come in contact with a group of nuns who were in the early stages of planning a new Catholic college in Dallas. They wanted a set of qualified professors to staff the school and turned to Ferenczy. He presented the opportunity to the monks in Spring Bank, who received the information well.

With the financial help of the Bishop of Dallas-Fort Worth²⁰, Thomas K. Gorman, the plan was expanded to be a full-fledged university, to be called the University of Dallas, under the direction of the diocese. Lékai described what happened next:

Late in 1953 the visiting new Cistercian Abbot General Sighard Kleiner negotiated personally with Bishop Gorman. The Order’s full participation in the new venture received endorsement by all authorities concerned and it was resolved that all the exiled priests with degrees should move to Texas as soon as possible. During the school year of 1954-55 seven fathers were active in Bishop Gorman’s diocese.²¹

The Cistercians were now in Texas, with a clear direction in mind. However, they were still years from settling into the monastery that stands today.

¹⁸ Lékai, *Hungarian Cistercians*, 232.

¹⁹ The Catholic church is divided into territorial dioceses, each headed by a Bishop.

²⁰ The diocese of Dallas-Ft. Worth was split in 1969 into two dioceses, one serving Dallas and one serving Ft. Worth.

²¹ Lékai, *Hungarian Cistercians*, 234.

In the fall of 1956, the Cistercian Fathers participated in the opening of the University of Dallas. Just weeks later, after what seemed to be a triumphant moment in the history of these refugees, the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 began. Thousands of refugees fled from Hungary, including “a considerable number” of young fathers and monks from Zirc. This meant a need for a larger space, a permanent monastery.

It was under these circumstances that construction began on March 7, 1957. The monastery was built on forty acres of land, donated by the diocese, adjacent to the University of Dallas. It would cost \$250,000, paid partly by the monks’ savings and partly through a bank loan. The community moved the week after Christmas, at the very end of 1957.²² They had found their final home in Texas: Our Lady of Dallas.

Today the Hungarian Cistercians who came in the 1950s are elderly. Some have passed away, others are sick. Their story, their courage and their faith have, at least in part, encouraged seventeen Americans to enter the monastery and take vows, including the newly elected Abbot Peter Verhalen, a sign that the traditions of Cistercians in Texas will continue well into the 21st century. It is important that their story be written down, before it is lost for good.

²² *Historia Domus*, 2.