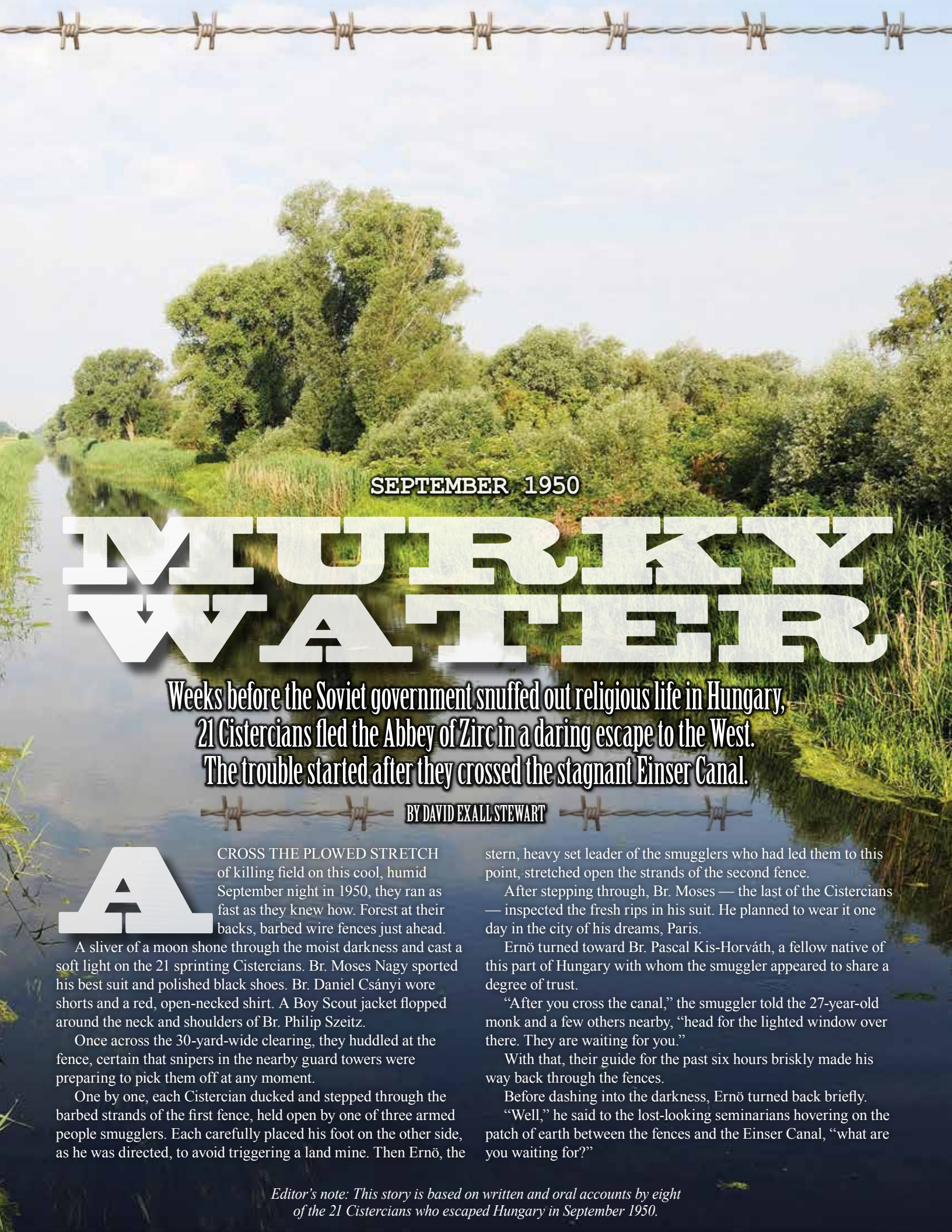
Einser Canal on the Hungarian-Austrian border

The canal today as viewed from the Bridge at Andau, within 20 miles or so of where the Cistercians crossed in 1950. Note the remains of a Soviet guard tower. The red arrow on the relief map points to the escape area.



SEPTEMBER 1950

MURKY WATER

Weeks before the Soviet government snuffed out religious life in Hungary, 21 Cistercians fled the Abbey of Zirc in a daring escape to the West. The trouble started after they crossed the stagnant Einser Canal.

BY DAVID EXALL STEWART

ACROSS THE PLOWED STRETCH of killing field on this cool, humid September night in 1950, they ran as fast as they knew how. Forest at their backs, barbed wire fences just ahead.

A sliver of a moon shone through the moist darkness and cast a soft light on the 21 sprinting Cistercians. Br. Moses Nagy sported his best suit and polished black shoes. Br. Daniel Csányi wore shorts and a red, open-necked shirt. A Boy Scout jacket flopped around the neck and shoulders of Br. Philip Szeitz.

Once across the 30-yard-wide clearing, they huddled at the fence, certain that snipers in the nearby guard towers were preparing to pick them off at any moment.

One by one, each Cistercian ducked and stepped through the barbed strands of the first fence, held open by one of three armed people smugglers. Each carefully placed his foot on the other side, as he was directed, to avoid triggering a land mine. Then Ernö, the stern, heavy set leader of the smugglers who had led them to this point, stretched open the strands of the second fence.

After stepping through, Br. Moses — the last of the Cistercians — inspected the fresh rips in his suit. He planned to wear it one day in the city of his dreams, Paris.

Ernö turned toward Br. Pascal Kis-Horváth, a fellow native of this part of Hungary with whom the smuggler appeared to share a degree of trust.

"After you cross the canal," the smuggler told the 27-year-old monk and a few others nearby, "head for the lighted window over there. They are waiting for you."

With that, their guide for the past six hours briskly made his way back through the fences.

Before dashing into the darkness, Ernö turned back briefly.

"Well," he said to the lost-looking seminarians hovering on the patch of earth between the fences and the Einser Canal, "what are you waiting for?"

Editor's note: This story is based on written and oral accounts by eight of the 21 Cistercians who escaped Hungary in September 1950.

Wading across the canal — some clothed, some (like Br. Moses) carrying their clothes above their heads — the Cistercians emerged on the far bank in Austria, coated in murky, stagnant water. It was around 4 am.

The narrow waterway defines the western border of Hungary in this sparsely populated portion of Austria known primarily for its vineyards. But the centuries had washed waves of ethnicities, cultures, and languages back and forth over this stretch of Europe and blurred all but the arbitrary political boundary. (Most of this part of Austria, known as Burgenland had, in fact, belonged to Hungary prior to World War I.)

The Cistercian refugees were aware that Burgenland and Niederosterreich (the largest Austrian state to the north, and home to Vienna) belonged to something called the "Soviet zone." But none fully appreciated the implications of this post-war Allied arrangement in Austria (which would end in 1955).

As the Cistercians emptied the water from their shoes, dried off, and dressed, the long journey caught up with the 19 seminarians and two priests. Having traveled for nearly 20 hours straight, all agreed to snooze in the nearby haystacks until dawn. Their Austrian adventure from here to Vienna's friendly Allied zones would have to wait until first light.

"It hit me after we crossed the canal," remembered Fr. Benedict Monostori years later, "that I had just left my country, and that we may never in our lives be able to return."

Thoughts of the momentous nature of their trip must have crossed the minds of the other Cistercians as well.

As Fr. Benedict drifted to sleep, however, unsettling and persistent fears began to annoy the 31-year-old monk. He felt the mantle of leadership for this group now fell to him, despite having played no role in the planning of the escape.

Even more troubling, he acknowledged later, "I had no idea where we were going."

Up until now, few in the group were concerned with who among them had organized the impressive breach of the Soviet's formidable border, which Winston Churchill had recently christened, "the Iron Curtain."

The plan to escape the Soviet's suffocating grip on religious life in Hungary — and the crowded and deteriorating conditions within the Abbey of Zirc (pronounced zeertz) — had hurried from concept to execution in a matter of seven days.

Despite the short notice, the plan to reach the Austrian border had been meticulously conceived and executed.

Word of a possible escape had been spread from one monk to the next. Only a select few had been authorized to initiate discussions of it. Those who made the decision to escape had pledged not to impart word of it to anyone, including their parents.

Abbot Wendelin Endrédy, the abbot of Hungary's once powerful Abbey of Zirc, had entrusted the lives of his treasured brothers to Br. Pascal Kis-Horváth, a 27-year-old native of western Hungary who had joined the abbey three years earlier. The abbot and the brother were first cousins once removed (Br. Pascal's mother was the abbot's cousin) and both grew up products of working-class parents from the countryside near the border with Austria.

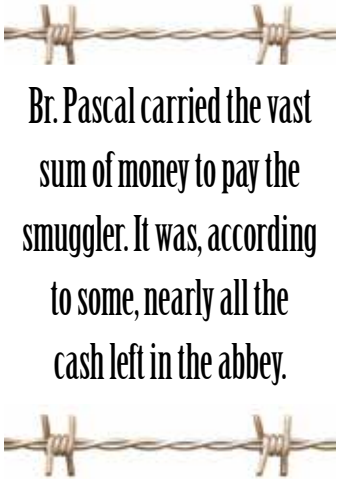
But they had taken divergent paths.

The abbot's academic prowess had earned him a scholarship to a Benedictine gymnasium (grades 5-12) in Győr that propelled him to university studies, the priesthood, and a brilliant teaching career before being elected abbot.

Kis-Horvath lost his father as a young child and later contracted tuberculosis in his hip, leaving him with a severe limp for the remainder of his life. Unlike his academically blessed relative, Kis-Horvath possessed skills more suited to the farm than the classroom.

And, at age 25, he was finding those skills under-appreciated in his job as a porter in the Cistercian residence house in Budapest.

So when Kis-Horváth discerned a priestly vocation, the abbot eagerly worked to help make his dream come true (a task that included preparing him to pass Hungary's difficult high school equivalency exam, despite a spotty high school education).



Now the abbot hoped Kis-Horváth's skills with practical matters and people — as well as his knowledge of western Hungary — could save some of the abbey's brothers from the oblivion of life under Soviet rule.

So the abbot sent Br. Pascal to his hometown of Petőháza (adjacent to the abbot's hometown of Fertőszentmiklós) to scout out a reliable smuggler who might help the Cistercians navigate the dangerous border crossing into Austria, then travel to a seminary located in the American-occupied zone of Vienna, and eventually to Rome.

When the scope of the escape plans grew suddenly, Br. Pascal adapted — absorbing, organizing, planning, and directing the larger-than-expected numbers.

Br. Pascal managed the entire process without assistance. For obvious reasons, the abbot and other officials of the monastery did not want to know the specifics.

Breaking the group into pairs, Br. Pascal planned their train and bus schedules, armed them with directions (which instructed them not to interact with other Cistercians they might encounter, including the abbey's many priests, who were to remain ignorant of these plans).

They would take a variety of routes to their rendezvous point in Bősárkány, located 5-6 miles from the border.

Br. Pascal carried the money to pay the smuggler (an enormous sum equal to approximately four times the monthly minimum wage of a Hungarian worker, per Cistercian). It was, according to some, nearly all the cash left in the abbey.

The Cistercians owed their safe passage through the Iron Curtain as much to the planning and leadership of Br. Pascal as to the skills of the people smuggler, Ernő.

As light began to fill the September sky on Wednesday, September 6, 1950, the 21 Cistercians awoke one by one and began to congregate — the stench of the canal clinging.

It seemed natural when Fr. Benedict began to discuss the group's next moves, smoothly assuming command despite the uncertainties he entertained.

Photos of the Abbey of Zirc on pages 11, 12, and 13, courtesy of Attila Kovács

Most of the seminarians were accustomed to the cadence of the 31-year-old. For the last several years, he had served as the prefect, or superior of the abbey's 40 or so brothers (those who had completed their novitiate).

Even the seven youngest of the group — those who had spent just one year in the monastery — had come to know Fr. Benedict. (Due to the growing oppression, Rome had provided dispensation to allow them to profess their vows in June, rather than the customary August.)

It quickly became clear to Br. Pascal that Fr. Benedict had somehow misinterpreted Ernő's words. He pondered his options.

Had the abbot sanctioned this transfer in leadership to take place at the border and simply failed to inform him? Could he dare question the authority of his superior?

He swallowed hard.

Instead of heading to Andau, the village to the north where a contact was waiting to direct them on their way to Vienna, the dirtied group began moving through the fields in a more southerly direction, toward Tadten, a smaller village where Soviet authorities had spent the previous few days patrolling.

A LETTER FROM THE CISTERCIAN Order's *Casa Generalazia* (General House) in Rome lay opened on the abbot's desk at the Abbey of Zirc in August 1950. It contained a directive from Abbot General Matthaeus Quatember.

A particular monk, one Fr. Ányos Lékai, was needed immediately in Rome to prepare for a mission to Spain, according to the abbot general. (Fr. Ányos was the younger brother of Fr. Louis Lékai, a Cistercian already living in America who would become a highly regarded history professor at UD.)

The letter gave Abbot Wendelin pause.

The once powerful Abbey of Zirc was staggering in the summer of 1950, a mortally wounded victim — like the rest of Hungary — of totalitarian Soviet rule that had grown more oppressive with each year following World War II.

The Soviet regime had begun by confiscating and nationalizing private property in 1945, not long after the Nazi surrender.

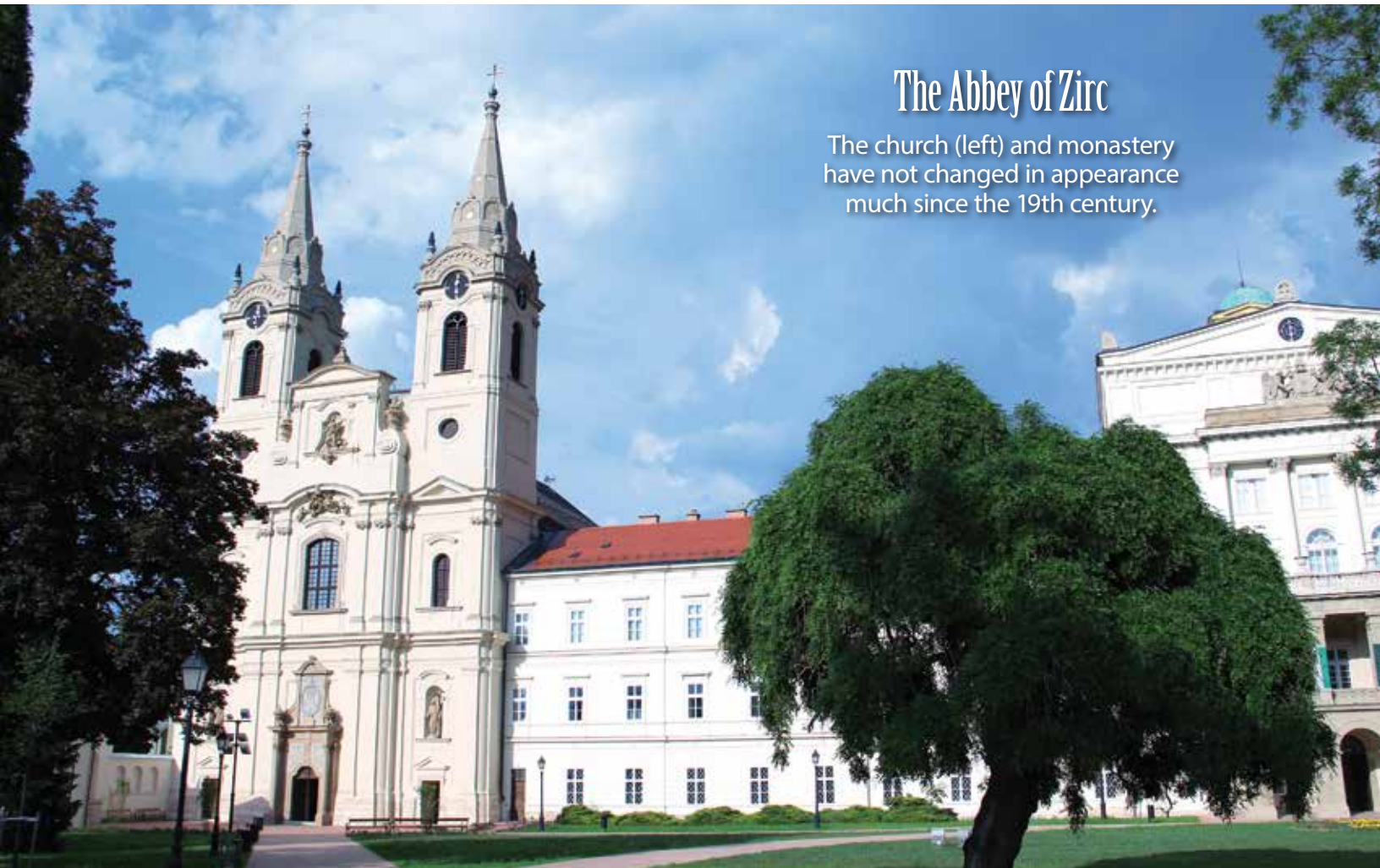
The Cistercians surrendered 40,000 acres of agricultural lands — gifted to them over the centuries by Hungarian monarchs — that had generated the funds to operate the abbey's five schools, many residence houses for monks, and its many parishes. Without the land, the order fell on hard times.

At the end of the 1947-48 school year, religious were banned from teaching in school, robbing the Cistercians of their teaching vocation.

Having failed to attract a popular majority of Hungarians in free elections in the years since 1945, Communist Party officials simply outlawed all other political parties in 1948 and arrested political opponents (including Cardinal József Mindszenty in December 1948).

With the opposition leaders imprisoned or in hiding, the government boldly proceeded to attack the last vestige of free thought in Hungary — religious life.

"The earnest words of the Savior have again interrupted the carnival's cacophony," wrote Abbot Wendelin in his February 1949 annual pastoral letter, "'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything written by the prophets about the Son



The Abbey of Zirc

The church (left) and monastery have not changed in appearance much since the 19th century.

of Man will be fulfilled: he will be handed over into the hands of the Gentiles, he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon, and after they have scourged him, they will kill him, but on the third day he will rise'" (Lk 18:31-34).

During morning prayers on a day in July 1950, nuns began to fill the front pews of the church at the Abbey of Zirc. The praying and chanting monks couldn't help but notice as the stream of nuns continued, eventually filling the building.

Nearly 500 nuns — more than a few crippled, infirm, and in wheel chairs — had been uprooted from their convents and transported by trucks to their new temporary home at Zirc, an abbey designed to house about 80 monks.

The monks withdrew to approximately one-fifth of the building area to provide sufficient room for the nuns. Even the abbey's elegantly wood-paneled library would be put into service to help accommodate the nuns.

Feeding the abbey's enlarged population became a daily struggle. Villagers dropped off supplies to help, but had to do so under the cover of darkness to avoid detection by the authorities. Monks worked in the fields where roles were switched: out here, monks with an agricultural background and less education took charge, while those with advanced degrees found themselves struggling to do as they were told.

The abbot general's letter had found Abbot Wendelin beleaguered and near exhaustion.

But he was still game.

Abbot Wendelin knew full well why Abbot General Quatember was interceding on behalf of Fr. Ányos.

The 33-year-old monk was one of several young priests from the Abbey of Zirc who had enthusiastically supported a reform movement, one that sought to return the Cistercians to their 12th century agricultural roots. (The movement mirrored a split in the 17th century in which the Trappists, or the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, broke off from the order.)

These several monks had been schooled in this movement during their studies in Rome, where they came under the tutelage of Quatember. The strict, minimalist lifestyle also attracted young men who — traumatized by the senseless killing and destruction of World War II — were already inclined to hold an almost apocalyptic world view.

In two young Hungarian Cistercians in particular — Fr. Piusz Halász and Fr. Ányos — these ideas took root.

When they returned to Hungary from Rome to be ordained, Abbot Wendelin was particularly impressed with the intellect and leadership qualities of Fr. Piusz, who he named prefect for the clerics (the nearly 40 brothers who had completed their novitiate and made temporary vows).

From this influential post, the charismatic priest began to share his reform-minded thoughts with the brothers in the Abbey of Zirc.

By 1945, Fr. Piusz even found a home for the movement in Borsodpuszta — a residence house for monks located 25 miles from Zirc on land that had been owned by the Cistercians before the property was nationalized. There, they established an alternative community — with the apparent approval of Abbot Wendelin — where Fr. Ányos served as sub prior.

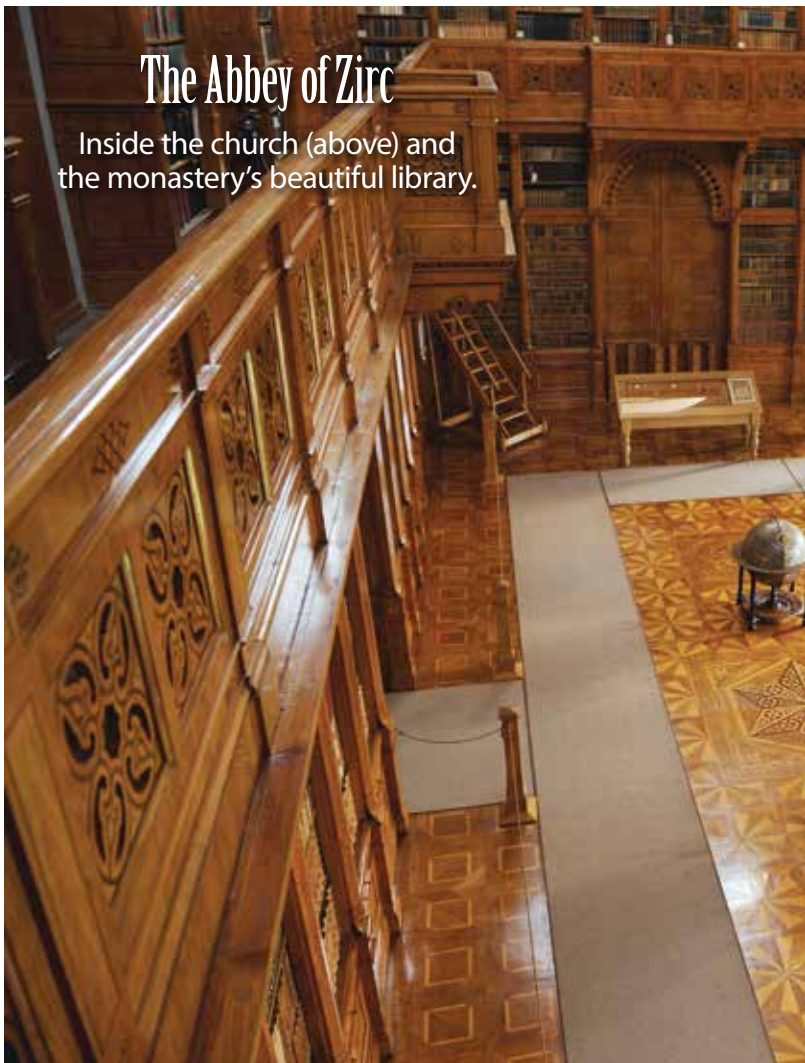
"It is perhaps even easier to love our enemies," the abbot noted in his 1946 pastoral letter, perhaps in reference to the reformist monks, "than the spouse in the marriage and the brother in the order.

"This is because forgiving the enemy is a manifest, solemn and heroic act, whereas the daily endurance of the brother, superior or subject, is a silent martyrdom, seen and appreciated only by God.

"So I ask you," he concluded, "before everything else, my dear brothers and sons, that the strengthening of brotherly love among us be the spiritual program for this year."

But as traffic between Zirc and Borsodpuszta grew with young monks interested in giving reform a try, the abbot's patience wore thin.

In 1947, he replaced Fr. Piusz as prefect with Fr. Benedict.



The Abbey of Zirc

Inside the church (above) and the monastery's beautiful library.

By 1950, Fr. Ányos had decided to part ways with Fr. Piusz and Borsodpuszta in search of greener pastures outside Hungary. (The Soviets allowed Borsodpuszta to operate for a few more years than Zirc because of its insignificant size.)

This letter from Rome suggested that Fr. Ányos' former mentor, the abbot general, had agreed to lend his influence to make his wishes come true.

Now, the job fell to Abbot Wendelin. Fortunately, the abbot knew just the person to whom he should turn.

The abbot's cousin left the abbey on Tuesday, August 29, for western Hungary where he would procure 50 kilos of sugar to help feed the abbey's swollen ranks of nuns and monks.

Returning two days later with the sugar, Br. Pascal reported briefly back to the abbot on Thursday that his secret mission had also been accomplished: he had met with a man who could be depended on to lead Fr. Ányos out of the country.

"I noticed an odd feeling about the abbey," Fr. Pascal recalled of his return that Thursday. Odd, since as far as he knew, the dire circumstances had changed little. "The brothers seemed energized."

In the course of just a few days, the abbot's perspective on the effort to smuggle out the reform-minded Fr. Ányos had changed dramatically.

"We had a council meeting yesterday," the abbot began slowly in a meeting with Br. Pascal on Friday. "We have decided to give our young brothers a chance to leave also and go to Rome to pursue their studies and their vocations." (It is unclear where, beyond Rome, Abbot Wendelin envisioned the young monks eventually settling. But the abbot had already begun to insist that the General House in Rome repay a debt to Zirc — dating back to 1938 — by providing Hungarian Cistercians safe refuge in a house that had been established by the order in Spring Bank, Wisconsin in the thirties.)

The dramatic change in plans unnerved Pascal.

"But I have arranged for just one traveler," he protested. "And how can I organize such a large trip so quickly?"

The abbot tried to calm Br. Pascal by authorizing him to approve all members of the escape. (The abbot did ask that two of the brightest intellects among the brothers, Br. Polykarp Zakar and Br. David Balás, be included so they might pursue advanced theological studies in Rome.)

"I did not sleep for three nights," Fr. Pascal remembered.

Meanwhile, Fr. Benedict met with the abbot to discuss his future once the abbey was closed by the Soviets. The abbot's council had decided that the ordained priests should remain in Hungary. The two discussed an assignment on the banks of Lake Balaton, not far from the area where Fr. Benedict was born.

Near the end of their conversation, the priest changed the subject.

"I have heard rumors," said Fr. Benedict, "that a group of seminarians are planning to escape. Does any father, or superior, plan to go with them?"

"No," answered the abbot.

"Should not someone go with them?"

"Who?" asked the abbot. "Would you volunteer for it?"

"If you think it right," said Fr. Benedict, "I will do it."

When Br. Pascal learned of this unexpected addition to the quickly expanding group (and one over whom Pascal held no veto), he objected directly to Fr. Benedict.

"Perhaps you organize it then," the brother suggested to the priest. "Otherwise, how will it look that I command a superior?"

"No, no," Fr. Benedict assured him, "you do it, and I will do everything as you say."

Days later, on the morning of September 5, the 20 seminarians, Fr. Ányos, and Fr. Benedict left the abbey in pairs, following the detailed plan and explicit instructions of Br. Pascal. While the border lay less than 70 miles west of Zirc, intentionally circuitous train and bus routes would take them all day to arrive in Bősárkány. One of the seminarians, a Br. Basil, would fall asleep near the railroad station and fail to wake in time to join the group on their swampy trek to the border.

"I felt bad," remembered Fr. Moses of his decision to leave Zirc, "like I was abandoning a sinking ship."

HEADING HESITANTLY toward the closest village, the 21 sleep-deprived Hungarians with mud-caked clothes appeared hapless and lost.

"We passed some peasants who were heading to work in the fields with their horses and carriages," remembered Fr. Elizeus Bán years later. "Some giggled at us and a few put their wrists together to show us that we would soon be handcuffed.

"We didn't believe them."

At the edge of the village, a small group was appointed to enter the village, and scout it out for their contact. But the 18 left behind began to move slowly along the path of their emissaries.

Wrong place, wrong time

At this bus stop near the church and rectory in Tadten, Austria, the first of eight Cistercians were arrested on September 6, 1950. Their journey from Zirc to Tadten is illustrated in the map (see inset).

"I didn't understand why they didn't stay outside the village," reflected Fr. Moses, one of the scouts, in his memoirs. By the time the three knocked on the door to the rectory of the catholic church — their best guess of where their contact might reside — the 18 hung behind them by a mere 150 meters.

A housekeeper answered the door and called for the pastor.

The three stepped into the rectory and met the pastor, who initially appeared to welcome the company of the visiting Hungarians. But that didn't last long.

When told of the size of the group, he started to shake and grow pale. He took a look outside at the large group loitering in the street and gasped.

"What should I do with you?" he demanded.

The pastor clearly had never been part of any escape plan.

"Half of you need to leave immediately," the pastor insisted, thinking quickly. He provided the name of the pastor in Sankt Andrä am Zicksee, about three miles northwest of Tadten, and a group of ten (Brs. Norbert Bárd, Daniel Csányi, Melchior Chladek, Stephen Harding Geröly, Aloysius Kimecz, Moses Nagy, Philip Szeitz, Berthold Szirotny, Alypius Tölgyessy, and Polykarp Zakar) left immediately.

The remaining 11 were divided into three groups and farmed out to the homes of trusted parishioners to freshen up.

A woman who spoke Hungarian welcomed Fr. Ányos, and Brs. Pascal, Tarján Petkó, and Albin Hegedüs at her home. She cleaned their clothes and cooked them a Hungarian favorite: noodles mixed with cottage cheese and bacon.

After a couple of hours, they returned to the rectory courtyard where they waited outside.

Inside, the pastor hoped this Hungarian nightmare of his might end quickly. He suggested to Fr. Benedict that they proceed in four groups and take the next bus out of town. He handed him some Austrian shillings to distribute for the fare to Vienna.

Outside in the rectory courtyard, Fr. Benedict then met with his charges.

Brs. Elizeus, Emmeram Biczo, and Farkas Katona were to enter the bus at the first stop, Fr. Ányos, Br. Pascal, and Br. Tarján at the second, and Br. Albin and Br. Xavier Haraszti at the third.

Fr. Benedict's threesome, including the fluent German-speaker Br. David, would remain in the rectory to observe and ensure all safely boarded the bus for Vienna before embarking on the next bus.

The first bus stop in Tadten lay just a few steps outside the rectory door, and directly across the street from the back of the small church. As the bus turned the corner on its way from Andau, the hearts of Elizeus, Emmeram, and Farkas began pumping faster.

"We tried to relax," remembered Fr. Elizeus in his account for the *Black and White*, the alumni magazine of the Cistercian schools in Hungary.

As they stepped up and on to the bus, the three greeted the driver before turning to walk to the back of the bus. They missed seeing the two policemen sitting in the front row attired in gray uniforms.

"None of us knew much German," Fr. Elizeus recalled. For an instant or two, as they sat down in the back of the bus, they must have felt relief: they were on their way.

"We had money, we knew the destination, we were waiting for the conductor to take our money."

But when the bus did not start, they became aware of a discussion going on in the front of the bus, although they initially had no idea it concerned them. Until that is, the driver and some passengers began shouting at them.

"We did not understand what they wanted," recalled the priest who now resides in Zirc. "We did not know that the tickets had to be purchased from the driver in Austria.

"A lady finally asked us in Hungarian if we came from Hungary. We smiled and nodded yes," thinking this might help in some way.

Photo by Fr. Justin McNamara

"You should have paid the driver when you boarded," she said.

The two policemen could no longer ignore the presence of the Hungarians and proceeded to the back of the bus.

When the three failed to produce the proper identification, they were escorted from the bus and to Tadten's city hall.

The long wait at the first stop worried Br. Pascal and he studied the bus as it approached.

"Something's wrong," he insisted. "Let's go."

Then they heard shouts from the bus that was pulling to a stop in front of them.

"Your companions have been taken to city hall," they said, "you should follow them there."

Br. Pascal was furious, scared, and inclined to make a run for it.

"We are in a free country," Ányos counseled. "Don't worry so much."

"We can't just turn ourselves in!" Pascal said in disbelief.

"I am responsible," he added, a bit indignantly. "You are obliged to follow my direction."

Tarján agreed.

"The Blessed Virgin will help us," the priest said, trying to calm Pascal as they walked in the direction they had been pointed.

"The Blessed Virgin," insisted the brother, "will not carry us to Vienna."

Alarmed at the sequence of events, the housekeeper alerted the pastor and the three Hungarians, who were waiting in the rectory.

Meanwhile, Brs. Albin and Xavier, having watched the events unfold at the second stop, decided to follow the others. They did not want to be separated from them.

As the policemen marched Elizeus, Emmeram, and Farkas down Tadten's sidewalks, a woman stopped them.

"Let them go," she pleaded to the police. "What do you care about these young men?"

"Don't worry," one responded, trying to calm her, "we'll just take them to the station.

"They can get ID cards there and go free."

At the railway station in Sankt Andrä am Zicksee (St. André on Lake Zick) in the early afternoon of September 6, five pairs of Hungarian refugees confidently arranged themselves so as to avoid arousing suspicion as they awaited their train to Vienna.

Since volunteering to halve the burden on the panicked pastor in Tadten earlier that morning, the ten had been welcomed compassionately and calmly by Fr. Johannes in this larger, lakeside village.

"The Blessed Virgin will help us," the priest said. "The Blessed Virgin," insisted Br. Pascal, "will not carry us to Vienna."

The pastor in Sankt Andrä and his housekeeper had housed the refugees together in the church where they napped while their clothes were washed; then the Austrians fed their guests a feast in the rectory (including ham and cheese omelettes, crusty bread, and apple juice topped off with freshly baked strudel).

As he sent them on their way, the pastor armed the Hungarians with shilling notes and explicit instructions for the various trains and streetcars required to reach the Pasmanaeum (the leading seminary) in Vienna.

But as their train approached, their sense of well-being vanished.

The large letters on the side of the train that became legible as it pulled into the Sankt Andrä station indicated this was a Hungarian train (a remnant of the days prior to the 1920 Trianon Treaty when this part of Austria belonged to Hungary).

When a ticket collector jumped off the train, the red star shimmering above the polished black visor of his hat twisted the stomachs of the Hungarians into knots.

Had this been a mistake by Fr. Johannes? Was their desperate stab at freedom to end here on this train platform?

Employees of the Hungarian train line (like employees in all industries) worked for the state. To ignore Hungarians leaving the country illegally would put him in danger of being arrested. To allow Hungarians escaping the country on his train, in effect aiding and abetting an illegal activity, would be a higher crime.

Informants lurked everywhere.

Who knew who was watching?

"Spread out in the car as best as you can," he winked to a few members of the group who could not disguise their terror. "Get off the train at the fifth stop, which is Neusiedl, and I will ask my Austrian colleague to make sure that you get on the right train and make it to Vienna. Good luck!"

"This man ignored the danger," marveled a deeply grateful Daniel Csányi, "and chose to help a bunch of strangers."

"NOW," Br. Pascal said pointedly to Fr. Ányos, shaking his head as the eight Hungarians sat together in Tadten's city hall, "now you can say the rosary."

While Br. Pascal couldn't help but suppose what might have been had the 21 followed Ernő's directions, the other seven stubbornly clung to any signs of hope.

"The mayor of Tadten, a limping man of 50 or so years of age," recalled Fr. Elizeus, "spoke Hungarian perfectly. He was very bothered by our case." But he didn't help them.

The mayor quickly left the matter to the police, who also wanted nothing to do with the Hungarians and transported them to Andau (where Ernő had directed they go immediately after crossing the border).

The eight spent the night at a convent.

Fr. Ányos said a mass. The Hungarian nuns provided the men with a festive supper, but shared little when asked to forecast their destinies.

While — as Br. Pascal pointed out to his brethren — nothing appears to have prevented the men from making a run for it (the nuns and even the police may have wished they would just disappear), the young seminarians led by Fr. Ányos refused to take matters into their own hands.

"*Amiamo la speranza*," their leader liked to say. "Let us love the hope." The sentiment frustrated the hands-on Br. Pascal who constantly sought to persuade the others of opportunities to escape.

The next morning, the nuns offered the men warm underwear and sweaters to take with them.

"We had counted on spending the winter in the warmth of Rome," Fr. Elizeus rued.

The nuns' gifts suggested they had a dimmer (and more frigid) view of the refugees' future.

The commotion in the night awakened Br. Daniel Csányi, one of the ten who had arrived at the Pazmanaeum in Vienna from Sankt Andrä earlier in the evening of September 6. The muffled voices, including that of Fr. Benedict, quickly soothed him.

"I drifted back to sleep," he remembered of that first night out from under the Soviet boot, "relieved that the remainder of our band had arrived safely."

It was only at breakfast the next morning that the horrifying news spread.

"They are where?" asked the brothers in disbelief in the morning.

"In an Austrian jail," Fr. Benedict repeated, as if in pain. Then, he shared the entire episode of the botched bus fare, the policemen, and the arrests.

> "This one," said an officer, kicking Br. Pascal hard in the ankle, "he's the stinking monk they want. Watch him. He's dangerous."

He, Br. David, and Br. Arcadius had fled to Sankt Andrä to catch the train from there to Vienna before the authorities learned of their location.

Clearly spooked, Fr. Benedict had already arranged for one of the Hungarians at the Pazmaneum to lead the remainder of his charges far from the Soviet zone as quickly as possible, under the assumption that the Soviets may have learned about their whereabouts.

By mid-morning, the 13 refugees — led by their Hungarian guide from the Pazmaneum (who had an Austrian identification that allowed him to travel between the Allied occupation zones) — arrived at the rail station in Mönichkirchen, a ski resort in the Alps close to the British zone.

Not far from the station, at the bottom of a ravine, a creek served as the demarcation line between the Soviet and British zones.

At their leader's signal, they rushed down the slope. Fr. Benedict slipped, landing on his bum, and slid the rest of the way, splashing into the creek.

"His less than flawless descent," remarked Daniel Csányi in his memoirs, "caused considerable and poorly concealed mirth among us."

At a tavern on the far side of the ravine in the British zone, their Austrian guide treated the refugees to a drink and waited with them until the bus for Graz arrived.

"Finally," recalled Fr. Moses Nagy, "we were really free. We danced and sang that we had escaped hell.

"But," he added, "we worried about the eight."

A friendly Austrian policeman escorted the eight Hungarian prisoners on a 90-minute bus ride to Eisenstadt, the capital of Burgenland, where they were handed over to the Soviets.

Here, they were fingerprinted, photographed, and treated as any other prisoners. While still ostensibly under the care of the Austrians, they were now officially prisoners of the Soviets.

At the city jail, their accommodations consisted of two small cells separated by a larger room where the eight could remain together during the day under the occasional supervision of a guard.

The small cells offered just enough room for two rudimentary bunk beds and a bucket that served as the toilet.

Feasts like the one they had enjoyed with the nuns in Andau became fond memories. Breakfast and dinner most often brought a small piece of bread and a little coffee that looked like tea; at lunch they received some soup and a vegetable or dough the size of a tennis ball.

"We didn't get fat," admitted Fr. Elizeus, who bunked with Farkas, Emmeram, and Xavier.

Occasionally they were taken outside to work. The guards quickly realized that only Br. Pascal had any experience with manual labor. That recognition earning him the honor of being handcuffed to and from the work sites.

At a hearing, they received important news.

"We cannot do anything," explained one of two equally corpulent Austrian officials. "You are prisoners of the Soviets. For our part, you could go free; but it is not our decision.

"That is up to the Soviet city leader. He will ask the Hungarians. It is they who will decide your destiny.

"We should mention to you that the Soviets are aware that your 13 comrades have left the Soviet zone."

That news gave the eight a little lift, and a sense of foreboding.

Everyone understood the Hungarian secret police, also known as the AVO (derived from the Hungarian, Állam Védelmi Osztag, or "State Defense Section") would hold the eight accountable for the good fortunes of the 13.

The eight began to discuss what they would say to the AVO when eventually interrogated — what to confess and what to deny.

Fr. Ányos continued to say mass almost daily, taught Italian, and talked on a wide variety of subjects to lift the spirits of the others. He even told how the Cistercians in Rome were forced to wear robes over their habits, even during the heat of the Italian summer, perhaps stretching the truth to reduce its allure.

"So Rome is not heaven," Fr. Elizeus reflected.

"No place on earth is heaven."

THE LUCKY 13 HURRIED to board the early train for Innsbruck, having spent only about six hours total in Graz, nearly all of them sleeping at the Dominican house.

"Why Innsbruck?" several of the brothers asked their superior after they settled in for the all-day ride.

"We're going to Stams," said Fr. Benedict, looking out the window.

The brothers knew of this Cistercian abbey, but wondered why not travel to other Cistercian monasteries that weren't located in far western Austria.

"I want to go as far away as we can from the Soviet-occupied zone," he explained.

"Lilienfeld is in the Soviet zone," he noted, "Schlierbach and Wilhering are not far from the Enns River, which is the demarcation line between the Soviet and US-occupied sectors.

"That's just too close for comfort."

The ride was a long one, making a number of stops, as it wound westward through the Alps.

Arriving in Innsbruck near midnight, the 13 had to wait another hour for the train to Stams.

It was after 2 am when they walked up to ring the bell at the

abbey's massive, but worn complex.

After a few minutes a middle-aged monk in a long gown greeted the group.

"I am Fr. Paulus," he said, appearing only mildly surprised that such a large group would come calling at this time of night. "Come in."

"His hollow cheeks and sunken eyes," recalled Daniel Csányi, "suggested he was a monk who fasted three days a week. Yet his smile was friendly and his voice warm."

"You have come to the right place," explained Fr. Paulus after learning of their travels and travails. "Our community is largely made up of refugees like you, monks driven out of their own homeland, Slovenia. (Years under Nazi influence had gutted the monastery of most of its Austrian monks; only two remained.)

"I am one of the refugees myself."

"I grew accustomed to the stench of the bucket," Fr. Elizeus recalled of the month the eight spent in the Eisenstadt jail. "I had always wanted to go to a strict monastery, and I think I could have lived in that jail forever, made a profession of the place."

Especially if it meant not having to return to Hungary in the company of the AVO.

"I propose we escape," Br. Pascal whispered, yet again, early one morning. In light of the growing pessimism regarding their fate, he had a willing audience for once. He explained that one of the bars on the window could be dislodged, making it possible to fit through.

"We'll jump down into the courtyard," he added, "and split into four or five directions. They won't be able to catch all of us."

Some were afraid that Tarján's weight would prevent him from squeezing through the bars; and the matter of landing safely from the second story concerned others.

Fr. Ányos suggested that the decision be put to a secret vote.

"We agreed it would be all or none; we wouldn't leave anyone alone," Fr. Elizeus recalled. "We prayed, and voted. The cowards won."

In the second week of October, cold winds were blowing as the eight were brought to a hearing before a Soviet official. At his side, a Hungarian stood.

The official spoke in friendly tones, but the Hungarian remained silent and very serious.

After the hearing, the eight sat for hours in a large room where soldiers and civilians hurried back and forth.

"Perhaps we will be freed!" a few thought out loud.

Not long after dark, they were ordered on to a covered truck. Two Soviet soldiers accompanied them, one armed with a machine gun, the other with a hand gun.

Within an hour, they arrived in Sopron, Hungary.

"That," recalled Fr. Pascal years later, "was when the real trouble started."

On the morning of Saturday, September 9, the 13 slept in until 8 am at the Abbey of Stams. The previous day's train ride through the Alps had been gray and rainy. But for the time being, the sun shone brightly, and the views from their windows took their breath away.

"Sparkling white snow," remembered Daniel Csányi, "covered the jagged crests of peaks etched against the deep blue sky. Dark evergreen forests rose up the mountainsides and large individual trees at the upper edge appeared to be the bravest soldiers of an army storming."

A knock on the door interrupted their sight-seeing.

Br. Josef Köll entered carrying a bundle of clothes gathered from the monks of the abbey: gifts from one set of refugees to another.

"We paraded around in our new garb," said Csányi, "some of us

Thirteen safe in Stams

The morning after arriving at Stams, Fr. Stefan Köll (center, with coat draped over his arm) posed with the lucky 13: Fr. Benedict Monostori (next to Fr. Stefan in a Cistercian habit) and (left to right) Brothers Daniel Csányi, Berthold Szirotny [partially hidden], Polykarp Zakar, Alypius Tölgyessy, Norbert Bárd, Melchior Chladek, Aloysius Kimecz, Moses Nagy, Arcadius Maróti, Stephen Harding Geröly, David Balás and Philip Szeitz.

Photo courtesy of Daniel Csányi

The 21 escapees from Zirc

(in order of seniority in the order)

FR. BENEDICT MONOSTORI: Died in 2014 at 95 after long career teaching physics at UD.

FR. ÁNYOS LÉKAI: 7 years in prison; freed in '56. Left priesthood in Dallas, married twice, died in England.

FR. PASCAL KIS-HORVÁTH: 4 years in prison. Came to Dallas in fifties. Procurator and sub prior. Died in 2013.

FR. FARKAS KATONA: 4 years in prison; ordained and served in Győr and western Hungary. Now resides in Zirc.

NORBERT BÁRD: Studied in Rome; ordained; lived in Springbank before leaving the order and marrying.

FR. ALOYSIUS KIMECZ: Came to Dallas in the sixties; taught at prep school, form master '79 and '87; died 2010.

FR. MOSES NAGY: Dallas in the sixties; taught foreign languages at UD; returned to Hungary and died in 2007.

TARJÁN PETKÓ: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; contracted Multiple Sclerosis.

FR. DAVID BALÁS: Came to Dallas in the sixties; taught philosophy at UD for many years; died in 2014.

BERTHOLD SZIROTNY: Came to Springbank in the fifties; left the order; died young of cancer.

ALYPIUS TÖLGYESSY: left the order and came to America.

RICHARD SZEITZ: Came to Springbank and Dallas; left order, married; professor in the arts, lives in Minnesota.

FR. POLYKARP ZAKAR: remained in Rome; abbot general of the order; arch abbot of Zirc; died 2011.

EMMERAM BICZO: 4 years in prison; imprisoned again after '56; left priesthood.

XAVIER HARASZTI: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; practicing Catholic.

ALBIN HEGEDÜS: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; married; died after long illness.

BELA MARÓTI: Came to Springbank; left priesthood, married. Drug/alcohol rehabilitation expert in Wisconsin.

DANIEL CSÁNYI: Taught at prep school and UD. Left priesthood in 1975, married. Lives in South Bend, Indiana.

STEPHEN HARDING GERÖLY: left priesthood; married; psychiatrist in Munich, Germany.

FR. ELIZEUS BÁN: 4 years in prison; ordained secretly in Hungary; novice master at Zirc in '89; now retired at Zirc.

FR. MELCHIOR CHLADEK: Came to Dallas in fifties. Taught at prep school until 1977. Retired.

Arrested in Tadten and imprisoned in Budapest.

Note: One of the original 22 fell asleep in Bősárkány and returned to Zirc.

with pants two sizes too large and held up around the waist with a tightly knotted string, others with shirt sleeves barely reaching to their elbow."

The gifts reminded all of them just how ill-prepared they had been for their sudden journey to freedom; how lucky they were to have made it, and how grateful they were for the hospitality and generosity of the monks of Stams.

After breakfast, as clouds obscured the sun, the Hungarians gathered outside for a photo with their host Prior Fr. Stefan Köll, wonder and amazement pasted across their faces.

Over the next two months — awaiting Italian authorities to issue their visas — the 13 worked along side the other monks in the abbey's large apple orchard.

They arrived in Rome on November 7.

In a basement in Sopron's AVO headquarters, the eight found themselves standing facing stone walls starting around 9 pm, legs spread and hands behind their backs.

AVO officers entered the room and walked slowly around the monks, who could only feel their presence.

"This one," said one as he kicked Br. Pascal hard in the ankles, "he's the stinking monk they want. Watch him, he's dangerous."

At around 1 am, the eight were led up and out of the building into the courtyard where a transport Fr. Pascal called the "fairy tale bus" sat puttering. (Only those who believed in fairy tales could imagine that a ride on this vehicle might end happily.)

They entered in the back and were put in one of the six cells on either side of the center aisle.

They slept little, and spoke even less.

"It was dawn when we arrived in Budapest," recalled Fr. Elizeus. "The bus went from prison to prison to drop us off. But it was only at the AVO headquarters that we were accepted."

The Hungarian secret police knew everything. They knew Pascal led the escape. They knew Ernő had shepherded the Cistercians across the border from Bősárkány.

They had captured and killed Ernő as well as the border guard he had bribed to ensure that the guard towers at the specified location would be unoccupied on the morning of September 6. Ernő's assistants, seminarians themselves, were imprisoned.

The Cistercians' escape — an egregious breach of Hungary's extensive border fortifications — had humiliated the Soviets. (According to Abbot General Polykarp Zakar, the escape would eventually serve as a case study for students in the Soviet secret police academy.)

Not surprisingly, the AVO officers in Budapest did not spare Br. Pascal as they "softened him up" for a confession and the eventual show trial against Abbot Wendelin, who would be arrested a few weeks later, on October 29.

The abbot received even more cruel treatment.

"My first torture took place in an elegant room," Abbot Wendelin recalled in his memoirs of the six years he spent in the custody of the Hungarian secret police.

"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 until, 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

(Above) 60 Andrassy Street in Budapest, headquarters of the Hungarian Secret Police, now the House of Terror Museum; (top right) interrogation room at 60 Andrassy Street; (bottom right) Br. Pascal, center, in Rome in 1956.

bed there was a leaking sewage line, constantly dripping on me. I was not allowed to lie down.

"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.

"After two sleepless weeks," the abbot wrote, "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 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."

At the abbot's show trial on June 28, 1951, Br. Pascal and Abbot Wendelin, now broken shadows of their true selves, met for one last time.

The abbot was sentenced to 14 years.

At a separate trial, Br. Pascal (and the six other seminarians) were sentenced to four years. Fr. Ányos received a sentence of seven years.

Near the start of the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956, Br. Pascal headed once again for the western border of Hungary, crossing into Austria not far from the spot where Ernő had led the 21 six years before.

Along with hundreds of thousands of other Hungarians, he passed through the village of Andau on his way to Italy. The people of this community became well known for welcoming the Hungarian refugees of 1956 at all hours of the night and day before putting them on busses to larger Austrian towns. (Their role was lionized in "The Bridge at Andau" by James Michener.)

Br. Pascal finally landed in Rome in November.

He was joined by a number of other young Cistercian brothers who had been formed underground during the harsh years of oppression between 1950 and 1956.

Br. Pascal, now 33, undertook the final year of study required for ordination.

One of the lucky 13, Fr. Daniel Csányi, taught him Biblical Studies.

"Rome was pretty tough on him academically," recalled Csányi, who left the priesthood in 1975. "He wouldn't have survived the regular course that was taught completely in Latin."

The former Hungarian farm boy was ordained in 1957, and eventually landed in Dallas. He would be the only one of the eight arrested in Tadten on September 6, 1950, to live in Dallas. (Fr. Ányos briefly passed through the abbey in the late sixties just prior to his departure from the priesthood.)

In Texas, Fr. Pascal served as Abbot Anselm Nagy's right-hand man, first as procurator, and then sub prior from 1976 to 1988.

Always personable, down to earth, and quick with a joke, Fr. Pascal might have taken some silent pride in having shaped the abbey in America.

The escape he master-minded had freed 13, including seven who came to Dallas (at least for a time): Frs. Aloysius, Benedict, Daniel, David, Melchior, Moses, and Philip.

Frs. Melchior, Daniel, and Aloysius played key roles in the founding years of the prep school.

A seventh, Fr. Polykarp, became abbot general of the Cistercian Order, and then served as the abbot of Zirc when it reopened in 1989 after the fall of Soviet Communism.

Fr. Benedict would occasionally wonder what might have been had he led the group to Andau rather than Tadten; but, few considered him at fault in any way.

Until his final few years, Br. Pascal rarely spoke of the terrors and trials of his incarceration.

Only when old age weakened his defenses did the horrors of his six years of torture and abuse pour forth, flashing back through his mind often while asleep and awake.

Reminding a new generation of the sacrifices made to preserve the traditions of the Abbey of Zirc.

House of Terror Museum exterior photo courtesy Wikipedia Commons, interrogation photo courtesy House of Terror Museum; 1956 photo of Fr. Pascal courtesy of Fr. Julius Lelocsky