



VITÉZ GÉZA LAKATOS
COLONEL GENERAL, PRIME MINISTER

REVIEW

AS I SAW IT

THE TRAGEDY OF HUNGARY

Géza Lakatos

After Adolf Eichmann was captured by Israeli commandos in Argentina and put on trial in Jerusalem, the one-time coordinator of the deportation of Jews in Hungary made the following statement:

Horthy's action was the only instance in all of Hitler-occupied Europe, in which an regular army allied with Germany was utilized to save Jews. I had never heard of such a thing; at first I thought that the reports were erroneous, or that I was dreaming. But later, Lakatos expelled me from Hungary altogether.

The action Eichmann referred to is associated with the name of General Ferenc Koszorus of the Hungarian Army General Staff.

During the Nazi occupation of Hungary, the Gestapo - with the help of László Baky and László Endre - planned a coup to attack the Jewish Ghetto in Budapest.

Koszorus had been stationed in the neighborhood of Esztergom with his "invisible" army, whose existence was unknown to the Germans. At Horthy's verbal directive, he deployed his forces in Budapest and ordered the 2,000-man gendarme unit to leave the city at once, or he would expel them by armed force. This historic date was July 6, 1944.

In 1994 we saw the film Schindler's List, about a German businessman who saved the lives of 1,100 Jews. When will they make one about Ferenc Koszorus, who saved 250,000 Hungarian citizens of Jewish faith, as well as thousands of Jews who fled from neighboring countries into Hungary?

It was this event that convinced Regent Miklós Horthy to fire the Sztójay cabinet, which had been forced upon him after Hungary's occupation by the Nazis, and to entrust Colonel General Géza Lakatos on August 24, 1944 with forming a new Government. Lakatos had commanded the First Hungarian Army, deployed on the eastern front to face the overwhelming Soviet advance, then later in Galicia and the Northeast Carpathians.

Regent Horthy had thrust a superhuman task onto General Lakatos. Under German military occupation and in an atmosphere of extreme tension he was expected to extract Hungary from a losing war and to sue the Soviets for an armistice.

Horthy and the Hungarian Government had been trying to conclude a peace treaty with the Allies on the West since 1942. London and Washington, however, were not prepared to negotiate a separate peace treaty. They told Hungary to request a cease fire from their eastern ally, the Soviet Union.

Barely two weeks before the German military occupation of Hungary, General Lakatos received an invitation to German Headquarters. He arrived in Berchtesgaden on March 12, where he was introduced to Hitler by General Keitel. Hitler spoke to Lakatos for half an hour, saying "Hungary is mistaken if she believes she can conclude peace separately with Soviet Russia," and "Hungary must bring much greater sacrifices that she had done so far. Everyone must go to the front, to the last man..." Lakatos remembers: "Hitler appeared old and sick, and his glazed eyes were fixed and piercing," and he became more and more furious as he spoke. "He informed me, furthermore, that a weapon was being devised to retaliate against England, and which would wipe out everything in its path." [The basis for the extensive propaganda about the German wonder weapons was the work being carried out at the Atomic Laboratory at Peenemunde.]

Lakatos related his audience with Hitler to Horthy as follows: "My general impression is that we are dealing with an aggressive, rigidly stubborn and possessed madman, who will inevitably lead the German Reich to disaster and, unfortunately, drag us along as well."

By March 17, Lakatos had returned to the front, where he learned of the occupation of Hungary. He told the envoy sent to him by General Mannheim, commander of the Heeresgruppe Sud, that the occupation was "a political blunder, which revealed a complete lack of understanding of the Hungarian soul and our history."

The Government formed by Lakatos on August 29, 1944 served until October 16 of that year: a mere six weeks. Its cabinet included Lieut. Gen. Gusztáv Hennyey [later promoted by Horthy to the rank of Colonel General], Foreign Affairs; Miklós Bonczos, Interior; Lajos Csátay, Defense; Gábor Vladár, Justice; Oliver Markos, Commerce; Tibor Gyulay, Industry; Ivan Rakovszky, Religion and Education. Two other ministers, who were Nazi sympathizers, completed the picture: Lajos Reményi-Schneller, Finance and Béla Jurcsek, Agriculture and Procurement. Bonczos, who became ill in October, was replaced by Baron Peter Schell, who, as it turned out, served in this capacity for only a few days.

It is interesting to note that sometimes cabinet discussions were conducted with the full knowledge that ministers Reményi-Schneller and Jurcsek would immediately inform German Ambassador Edmund Veessenmayer, who was a veritable Gauleiter. Of course, Veessenmayer himself was kept in *check* by Gestapo General Winkelmann.

Before embarking on his peace mission, Lakatos set up a secret council of experts who would reassess the military situation. The council had six members representing the military: retired Colonel Generals Vilmos Roder, Hugó Sonyi, and István Náday, Defense Minister Csátay, and Chief of the General Staff János Vörös, and Foreign Minister Hennyey; as well as four civilians: Count Gyula Károlyi, Count Móric Eszterházy, Kálmán Kánya, and Baron Zsigmond Perényi. At the first meeting of the council, Count István Bethlen was also present.

Since the complete halting of the deportation of the Jews by Horthy, members of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party and some politicians of the extreme right conducted a propaganda smear campaign, labeling the Government and its members as "a clique of traitors". In the meantime, recalls Lakatos, "our army was weak and lacking in modern weapons and there was no help from the Germans, despite the unstoppable might of the Soviet forces."

Lakatos remembers with gratitude Count Béla Teleki, whose personal agents managed to infiltrate the German Embassy. He was sorry to see Teleki return to his birthplace in Transylvania to await the arrival of the Russian troops there. The Romanians eventually pulled out of the German alliance and attacked the retreating German army.

The entire cabinet was not informed about the separate peace mission; only Csátay and Hennyey were aware. The delegation sent by Horthy to Moscow set out, across Slovakia in the last days of September. It consisted of Lieutenant General Gábor Faraghó, Count Géza Teleki, and Domokos Szentiványi. They chose a route through the estate of Count Ladoér Zichy, whose brother-in-law, Baron Daniel Bánffy, acted as liaison between Horthy and the delegation.

October 15 was the fateful day when the Regent's proclamation was read over the radio: Hungary is pulling out of the war. Although Lakatos had not countersigned the proclamation, he was meeting with Horthy when a German officer entered the room and declared to Horthy: "the Prime Minister wants to speak with you." "What Prime Minister?" "Herr Szálasi." Horthy went, into an adjoining, room and upon his return informed Lakatos: "Szálasi wants me to hand power over to him. I threw him out."

The proposed armistice turned out to be a complete fiasco. Lakatos lists the following factors: 1) the overwhelming superiority of the German occupation forces, which the Arrow Cross could rely upon; 2) the capture of the young Miklós Horthy as a hostage; 3) collaborators among the Regent's immediate entourage; and 4) the broadcasting of the proclamation before the armistice had been signed.

"It is certain," commented Lakatos, "that under no circumstances would Horthy order an attack on the Germans." Lakatos has also stated, and this, too, is of historical significance, that he never, resigned from his position as Prime Minister, nor was he ever relieved of his duties by Horthy.

While the battles were still raging, Lakatos made this observation: "We should not condemn those soldiers who followed the orders of their superiors. Undoubtedly, those at the front were not members of the Arrow Cross. We know that everyone was being terrorized into swearing allegiance to Szálasi. The younger officers followed the example of the older ones, and carried out their orders. Many well-meaning soldiers felt that, whatever their political views, the time had come to show their patriotism and courage."

We know Horthy's fate: at the order of the *Führer*, he and his family were arrested and taken to Germany. Lakatos and his wife were first transported to Tihany, then via Pannonhalma to Győr, then Sopron, and eventually to prison in Sopronkőhida. There he found himself in illustrious company: Miklós Kállay was there, as was Vilmos Nagy de Nagybacon, Prince Nándor Montenuovo, Prince Lajos Hohenlohe and his wife, former Chief Justice Géza

Töreki, Generals Hennyey, Ferenc Szombathelyi, and Imre Ruzsiczay-Rudiger, several high-ranking officials from various ministries, actor Pál Jávör, and actress Iona Titkos. General Lajos Veress had been placed in solitary confinement to await his death sentence.

Lakatos remembers with deep gratitude the Benedictine monks who had welcomed and accommodated him and his wife with great kindness at Pannonhalma, Gyôr, and Sopron. He is also indebted to two doctors, Professor Sándor Lumniczer and Imre Haynal, who were treating him for a serious stomach ulcer.

When the Soviets occupied Hungary, they interrogated Lakatos through an interpreter, evicted him from his Budapest apartment, interned him in Kiskörös, made him testify at Szálasi's trial and on several other occasions, and sentenced him to internal exile in Egyék. And how did the nation - and history - repay this outstanding soldier after forty years of service? Even his pension was revoked. The Jewish religious community, remembering the hundreds of thousands of Jews whose lives he saved, offered him an annuity of 1,000 forints per month, which Lakatos politely and respectfully declined.

Meanwhile, Lakatos was attacked by the Communist press as "Horthy's last standard-bearer." He kept in touch with Ferenc Nagy, who was, with Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, one of the political prisoners taken to Germany after the occupation, and whom Lakatos managed to free and repatriate. He also remembers József Kôvágó, Lord Mayor of Budapest, with gratitude.

In July of 1956, Géza Lakatos, the Colonel General and one time Prime Minister, was "permitted" to join a cooperative in Budapest, where he hand painted set patterns on handkerchiefs. He also painted First Communion and Confirmation certificates, as well as greeting cards for Christmas and Easter.

On October 23, 1956, the day of the uprising, he was living in Érd, just outside Budapest. On November 6 he was taken ill and had to be hospitalized. In 1960, his beloved wife passed away, In 1963, Lakatos completed his memoirs. In 1965, after several attempts, he was finally granted a "visitor's passport" to see his children and their families in Australia. He died there in 1967, and is buried in Adelaide.

Géza Lakatos's story is absorbing, and his memoirs make exciting reading. It took quite while for them to reach a publisher. His daughter, Maria Lakatos Szent-Ivány, promised him before his death that she would publish his memoirs. In 1977, poet and journalist Tibor Tollas visited Australia. It was he who took the Lakatos manuscript to Munich for publication in Hungarian [Aurora Publishing].

The English language edition has just been published in New York by George Rédey. The foreword by Professor John Lukács, the well-know American Hungarian historian, stresses that Géza Lakatos had remained loyal to Horthy and to the ideal of Hungary's independence. He tried to save his nation during one of the most difficult periods in its history. In her preface, Lakatos's daughter expresses her gratitude to Mr. Tollas, George Irsay (her cousin, who financed the first edition in Hungarian), and Mr. Rédey.

Many are unfamiliar with that period of Hungarian history which began in March of 1944 with the occupation of Hungary by Nazi Germany, and ended on April 4, 1945 with the Soviet occupation, which lasted another fateful 45 years. From Lakatos's memoirs, it is clear that Hungary's people, including her high ranking military officers, did not succumb to the superior forces of the Nazis, and saved more people than any other country in Europe.

The struggle for freedom and national independence are evident in Lakatos's memoirs. In Hungary's 1,100th year and 40th anniversary of the 1956 uprising, it is important that as many people as possible read the book, and give copies of it to American friends.

by John Fercsey
translated by Ildi Wetherell, 1996

As I Saw It - The Tragedy of Hungary, by Colonel General Géza Lakatos, with Foreword by Professor John Lukács.