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The forgotten Gypsy heroes of the Hungarian revolution of 1956

Abstract

In autumn 1956 the people of Hungary rose against the Stalinist terror and Soviet occupation. One of the most significant events in the history of Hungary – which lasted only 20 days – started as a peaceful demonstration on 23 October and extended to several towns and cities of the country. On 4 November, 1956 the Soviet troops initiated an undeclared war against Hungary. The outnumbered country fought bravely alone, but eventually the revolution was drowned in blood, and the country was occupied by the Soviets. 3,300 insurgents were killed during the uprising, 229 were executed as retaliation, an additional 20,000 revolutionaries were imprisoned, and 13,000 rebels were interned. Nearly 200,000 people fled abroad. According to my research several young Gypsies – including men and women – participated in the fights of the capital and rural towns, many of them sacrificed their lives and even more were sentenced to serious imprisonment. However, Gypsy heroes of the revolution of 1956 are almost completely left out of the memories of Hungarian people; they are neither mentioned in textbooks nor taught in schools. The purpose of my work is to remember the actions and the fate of young Gypsies² who fought for a free Hungary.

Keywords: Hungary, Roma, Gypsies, 1956, revolution, prison, patriot, hero, Soviet occupation, terror

In the 1950s the majority of Hungarian Gypsies was living in more extreme poverty than the non-Gypsy poor sections of society; poverty, underdevelopment, almost general illiteracy, hopelessness and scarcity were the main characteristics of the life of Gypsies living in the suburbs and in separated communities. In the commencing economy there was no demand for their workforce, and the market of their products was eliminated by modern large-scale

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² In my study I use the expression Gypsy/Roma alternatively as synonyms without any defamatory interpretation, since a large number of Gypsies in Hungary refuse the term „Roma” (see in detail: Szabóné 2016:33-36)

industry; there was no need for their smith or timber goods. Due to the lack of work and stability, they served mostly as a problem for public health and public administration both in local and national politics. In a report by the Ministry of Health in 1955 it is stated that: *“Although a part of Roma population stood out of their notorious situation after the liberation, still there is a significant number of Gypsy communities today living a semi-nomadic life in incredible poverty and inhuman conditions.”*

Due to those above, their traditional countryside life in closed communities, and their lack of organization it is reasonable to assume their disinterest towards political ideas. However, reality shows the exact opposite; in the beginning of the 1950s a young Roma woman called Mária László bravely stood up – taking a huge risk – in front of the public and the party leadership to ask for support from the leaders of the country by explaining the hardships of Roma people: *“Our fate depends on sheer luck and well-intentioned people [...] if the government does not help, there will not be human recovery.”* (Sághy 2008) Mária László is considered as the first Roma politician – she was sentenced to prison for her political activities later – who came from a horse-dealer family in Nagykáta, became a journalist, sympathized with social democrat principles, and was in contact with Anna Kéthly. In 1955, 280 residents of the Roma settlement in Pánd sent a letter to the political leadership: *“We hereby request the competent authorities to facilitate the possibility for us to learn to read and write, and to study a profession... We would like to be equal citizens and fulfil our duties so.”* (Sághy 2008) Awakening and political engagement – however only in a small number and in a disorganized way - had started among Gypsies.

Young Gypsies joined the revolution first in the capital city, the best-known was *Ilonka Szabó “Shaggy”* among them. The 17-year-old girl from Újpest and her girlfriends were walking in downtown during the outbreak of the revolution when they met the crowd of the peaceful demonstration. As Shaggy heard them chanting *“Join us if you are Hungarian! Hungarians come with us!”* she immediately joined them. The reckless girl soon became one of the leaders of the Corvinists (six boys belonged to her), and her partner Bijou – also a Gypsy – taught her how to handle guns in the midst of the fights. After five days of fighting she was shot dead on 28 October at the end of Práter Street. Her heroic conduct is promoted by a plaque at Corvin-square in Budapest with the following text under the embossing: *“In honour of the 17-year-old comrade Ilona Szabó, the little “Cinka Panna”³ who sacrificed her young life in the revolution of '56 for the freedom of our country. Her fellow fighters:*

³ Cinka Panna was a famous Hungarian Gypsy violinist in the 18th century.

National Revolutionary Association of '56, World Federation of Hungarian Freedomfighters"
(The death report mentions that the deceased was four months pregnant.)

Shaggy's partner "*Bijou*" - *Gábor Dilinkó* -, was a tough Gypsy boy from Újpest who reached Corvin-square when looking for her, and joined the revolutionaries. He engaged in armed fights. He was taken to Korányi Hospital due to shots to the head and thigh at the beginning of November, but he was turned in to the authorities by one of the nurses. He spent five and a half months in solitary confinement, then he was sentenced to 12 years with charges of "armed insurgency and infidelity against the ruling regime". In the prison he served together with *Árpád Göncz*⁴, *Ottomár Faddy*, and *Jenő Fónay*. He was released in 1966 and remained under strict police surveillance for five more years; even later it was hard for him to find a job, his past from '56 haunted him his whole life. He started painting in the seventies, and became an acclaimed naive artist; he attended several exhibitions at home and abroad. After the change of regime he was rehabilitated; in 1991 he received the award of "Faithful persistence" for his role in the revolution, later he was granted the Knightly Order of Valiant, the Colonelcy, and in 1998 the Knight of Cross from the Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic. He lived a poor life; ironically he spent the last few years of his life in Mátyásföld, in one of the small apartments in the house of freedom fighters established in a former Soviet barrack, the Home of Comrades. In an interview he said the following about the revolution, Shaggy and what happened to him: *"I loved the truth. I went to a school where my teacher always told me: "A good Hungarian is someone who loves his country." [...] When Shaggy was shot dead on 28th, I said: I have no business here anymore. But we resisted until 4th November."* About the torture and prison he said: *"I do not complain. One must endure this for his country. If I consider myself a Hungarian, I remain Hungarian in times like this as well. But I never denied being a Gypsy. That is not acceptable!"* (Varga 2006)

The tinsmith, locksmith, "wireman" itinerant craftsman called *József Kóté Sörös "Holi"* also paid with his life for the role he played in the revolution. First he joined the movements in his hometown, Monor. Then he assisted in the delivery and allocation of foodstuff - collected for insurgents and hospitals - from Monor to the capital city. On 30 October he joined the rioters of Vajdahunyad Street; he took part in armed fights and in the watch, and also persisted in the resistance against the Soviet invasion on 4 November. At the end of December he fled to Austria with his fellows from Monor, then in March, 1957 he returned home (likewise many of his fellows) to the promise of amnesty which was not kept. On 8 July, 1957 he was

⁴ *Árpád Göncz* was the President of the Republic of Hungary between 1990 and 2000

arrested. His wife was expecting their third child at that time. As a tertiary co-defendant of the “Lawsuit of Mária Wittner and her partners” he was sentenced to death by the Tutsek summary court with charges of “*actions towards overthrowing the political system of the people’s democracy*”. He was executed on 26 February, 1959. (Eörsi 2009)

The famous hero of the countryside events was *Gyula Dandos*, the martyr student leader who was born in Torockó into a religious, Unitarian Roma family. He lost his parents at an early age and was taken to foster care. He grew up in orphanages; in Debrecen, Karcag, Balkány, and in Switzerland between 1947 and 1949 as courtesy of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He graduated from Kossuth Lajos High School in Nyíregyháza. He joined the local revolutionary events at the outset on 26 October; he possessed sterling organizational and rhetoric skills, and read out the students’ 21 points of revolutionary claims that day in the city centre from the top of a truck, then delivered a speech from the balcony of the city hall.

On 2 November he was appointed to organize and lead the Revolutionary Student Council of Nyíregyháza; this organization held together the youth of the local School of pedagogy and the five county dorms. He became a member of the Revolutionary Council of Nyíregyháza and organized armed forces from the youth. An extract from one of his speeches: “*We have one weapon against the Soviets, and that is enlightenment. The Russians had been misled, they need to be enlightened that we are not counter-revolutionaries, and it is not about overthrowing the power.*” (Fazekas 1993) On 6 November - the third day of the Soviet invasion - he was captured and abducted to Uzhhorod. Later he was beaten up by the officers of the State Protection Authority so seriously that he could not move, and the doctor declared that his wounds were so severe like “third-degree burns”. One of his teachers arranged his accommodation at the school sanatorium in Szentgotthárd. However, he wanted to escape to Switzerland; during his second attempt to escape he was shot dead by the border guards at Szentgotthárd in 1957. His grave is unknown. Due to the pressure of communist rule, the following text was entered to his name in the summer of 1957: “*Today he was absent at his parents’ request. He can be admitted to any other high school.*”⁵ The State Protection Authority did not consider the fact that by that time his parents had been dead and the reference made to them was untrue; Gyula Dandos’s father had passed away 11 years earlier, while his mother had passed away 15 years earlier.

⁵ Entry no. 5/1957 is recorded in the Register of the year 1956/57 of Kossuth High School under no. 30 dated on 14 July, 1957 signed by Sándor Horváth Principal.

His memory is preserved by the posterity. The students and teachers of Kossuth Lajos Lutheran High School in Nyíregyháza keep a wreath-laying ceremony each year at his plaque inaugurated in 1993 on the wall of the dormitory, stating: "*Gyula Dandos (Torockó 1938 – Szentgotthárd 1957) lived here - in the late Petőfi Dormitory – between 1953-1957, who was a martyr and the student leader of the county in the revolution of 1956, and a student of Kossuth Lajos High School. 1993, Historical Justice Committee of the Association of Former Hungarian Political Prisoners.*" In 2009 the Hungarian National Guard posthumously promoted "*Gyula Dandos comrade, the martyr of the revolution of 1956 who died a hero at the age of 18*" a National Guard lieutenant. In Bereg, the presbytery of the unitary diaspora congregation founded an association in 1996 and picked up his name; *Dandos Gyula Roma Society* established the *Dandos Gyula Award* honouring people of good example, bravery, and patriotism. (Beregi 2014)

László Onestyák "Gypsy" is also one of the heroes sentenced to death. He was an 18-year-old boy during the revolution born in Pázmánd and worked as a locksmith in the capital. He took part in the armed riot in Budapest; he was one of the squad leaders of Berzencey Street in Ferencváros and the "Curly-group" of Ferenc-square. He persisted to the end with his team, as the Soviet invasion started on 4 November they continued the hopeless fight until 6 November. In the spring of 1957 they were collected. He was arrested on 26 April, not long after his marriage. According to his survivor fellow inmates, even the guards respected the fragile, kind, and brave boy, hoping he would be pardoned. However, his plea was rejected (Eörsi 1997), and he was executed on 22 November, 1958. His fellow inmates preserved his last words he cried out on the way to his execution: "*Long live the free Hungary!*" His relatives did not receive any notification or certificate about his death. His parents died in the 1970s believing he was still alive somewhere in a secret prison. His siblings learned about him from documents found after the change of regime, and in 2010 on the Memorial Day of the Victims of the Communist Regime they accepted his posthumous awards... His name is written on a memorial stone in the historical park of Pázmánd - called Onestyák László Park - with the following caption: "*Onestyák László, a boy from Pest. Born on 28 July, 1938, Pázmánd. Executed on 22 November, 1958.*" In Budapest, his name is included on a marble table of the heroes of '56 at the entrance of Salkaházi Sára memorial park in Ferencváros.

Sándor Csányi "Gypsy" a young casual worker was also sentenced to death for the role he played in the revolution. He moved to the capital city from Perkáta at the age of 18, where he served as a policeman for two years, then he was employed as an unskilled worker. In the

spring of 1956 he was taken to pre-detention for suspected common offences and was released on 4th November. The same day he joined the riots in Thököly Street, and fought the Soviet tanks with handguns, grenades, and Molotov. On 8 November they gave up the dead-end fight, and their team disbanded. On 1 October, 1958 he was arrested, sentenced to death on both instances, and executed on 28 October, 1959. (Eörsi 2010) His memory is preserved; his photograph and name is placed on the Wall of Heroes among the martyrs of the revolution at the House of Terror Museum in Andrásy Street.

Death penalty was imposed also on *Mátyás Kolompár* for his activities in Kiskunmajsa. A father of six, working as an itinerant craftsman joined the crowd of demonstrators and demanded the dismissal of the despotic collection president, the party secretary, and the mayor. The angry crowd - which grew huge since it was the day of the weekly market - marched to the city hall and requested the release of the collection president, József Neményi. Matyi was a tall man, hence he was sent down to the basement who brought him up in front of the crowd. The people attacked the hated local leader and beat him to death. After the crackdown of the rebellion, Mátyás Kolompár was arrested on 26 November, 1956 and sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment at first, then to death with charges of homicide. He was executed in 1857 in Kecskemét.

Among the numerous Gypsy participants of the revolution, most probably the youngest one was *Nándor Fehér*, a 15-year-old Gypsy who lived in the Mária Valéria slum of the capital. A few decades later this is how he remembers joining the insurgents: "*We were coming home from Rudas Bath and the trams were not operating. People would yell: Hungarians come with us! I said, hell I am going with them, of course I am. Because I am both Hungarian and Roma.*" He took part in the demonstration on 23 October, then in the attack of the building of the Radio. On 1 November he joined the people of Ferenc-square and Tüzoltó Street where he served in the watch and persisted even after the invasion of the Soviets on 4 November. In December, 1956 he escaped from retaliation to Austria but he soon returned and was arrested on 28 March, 1957. As a juvenile he was sentenced to prison for two and a half years, and was released on 3 April, 1959.

After the revolution was put down, some young Gypsies fled the country fearing retaliation, and many were sentenced to prison.

The electrician, *István Fátyol* - who came from a well-known musician family - was working as a lighting engineer at the Village Theatre (Déryné Theatre) when the revolution started. As

a result of the events, a committee was set up at the theatre quite early on 23 October. He was appointed as deputy chairman, and he organized their armed group of 15 people. They persisted until 7 November against the Russian tanks. Although, a national arrest warrant was not issued against him, he did not leave the country; he prepared and distributed leaflets, he was one of the main organisers of the woman protest in the capital on 4 December. He was arrested on 16 March, 1957 and kept in solitary confinement in Fogház Street prison for eight months. Later he was sentenced to 6 years of prison for "*Active involvement in activities aimed to overthrow the government*". He was released in 1961 with partial amnesty. Similarly to his fellows, he suffered the consequences of the tortures for the rest of his life. He also received a small apartment (18 square meters) as compensation in Mátyásföld at the Home of Comrades established in a former Soviet barrack.

Soroksár was an important location of the revolution outside the capital where the resistance was led by *Károly Strausz "Gypsy Karesz"*. The strict leader of the fights at Juta-domb was born in Pomáz into an itinerant grinder family. He lost both parents by the age of two. For a few years he was raised at a foster home, then his aunt from Soroksár adopted him. At the outset of the revolution he was employed as an unskilled worker by Csepel Steel and Metal Works. In Soroksár and Pesterzsébet the National Revolutionary Committee was already established on 29 October, and when the Soviet invasion against the capital started on 4 November, the command was clear: the tanks must be stopped! Gypsy Karesz joined the riots on 5 November, and he founded an independent section from his relatives and Gypsy friends. The following people served under his leadership: László Horváth, László Kránitz, Gusztáv Mohácsi, Mihály Németh, Sándor Németh, István Petrovics, and the Sztojka brothers; Gyula, Vince, László, and Peter. They persisted the longest in Budapest and surrendered only on 11 November. In 1959 all of them were collected and arrested. The case of Károly Strausz and comrades was treated in the trial of "Lajos Baka and his partners"; on the first instance the judge imposed death penalty on him in 1959 which was modified to life imprisonment on the second instance in 1960. He was released after 15 years in June, 1974. His partners were also sentenced to 10-14 years of imprisonment. (Eörsi 2014)

In regards to the outbreak of the revolution of 1956, an event - that happened before 23 October – must be mentioned which is considered as the "*pilot flame of the revolution*". On the evening of 22 October, 1956 *György Cziffra* – a prodigy Roma piano player who later become world-famous – was playing Bartók's II. Piano play at the Academy of Music. Critics later wrote: "*Clapping erupted just like red-hot lava.*" The artist describes it as the

following: *“The big day arrived, and the concert of big hopes was a huge success. In fact, this audience reflected a nation that was fed up with the abuses of the system whose glorious corps had forgotten to go home for eleven years. This music - which is the order itself despite of its seemingly crazy complexity – demands true self-surrender, and it made the audience to erupt in clapping like melted lava. The two thousand, generally disciplined people rushed out of the concert hall by chanting the Hungarian anthem, and tore down everything on their way other than our national colours. The nation rose...”* (Cziffra 2015)

One of the mournful events of the revolution was the cannoning of the *Gypsy town of Kecskemét* from MIG 15 jet fighter aircrafts on 27 October, 1956. The winds of revolution spread towards the countryside. Lajos Gyurkó colonel saw it coming when he gave the following order to his officers on 24 October: *“Shoot the crowd if necessary.”* He was the commander of the 3rd Hungarian Legion which is the biggest military staff of the country, the jet-propelled fighter aircraft legion protecting the airspace of Budapest, and the Jet fighter Regiment no. 62 PF 7912; a blind believer and Stalinist stationed in Kecskemét. On 26 October, the previously amicable residents of Kecskemét organized a peaceful demonstration after learning about the events in Budapest; 10,000 – 15,000 people were marching the streets chanting *“Russians, go home! We want a free and independent Hungary!”* They knocked off the red stars from the walls of the State Protection Authority and the County Hall, then marched to the jailhouse and freed the political prisoners. This is when Gyurkó’s order took effect and the soldiers shot into the crowd; there were several fatalities and casualties. This was followed by the occupation of the Gypsy town; they were looking for guns, ammunition, hiding rioters without success. However – according to Gyurkó’s report – the next day when the soldiers intended to continue the search, they arrived to a gunfire. This is when he ordered the aircraft cannoning of the Gypsy town. A lot of men, women and children lost their lives due to the air strike. Those men who survived were driven out of the town and shot at a distance. (Kahler 1994) Their names are unknown, their fate is not restored in the memories. Many of them lie in anonym graves, even their relatives were not informed about their death.

The actions of a Gypsy comrade - his name is not mentioned - was preserved by a convicted prisoner in the police lockup in Vác in 1957:

Prison poem from the years of retaliation (Végh 1957)

The ballad of the little Gypsy

The little Gypsy was beaten black and blue
by the drunk and wild henchmen,
and drained of life
he was thrown to the ground.

We nursed him and compressed his wounds.
He vaguely fell to the bunk
- threatened by the next beating --:
all he had was our hope.

They would not let him walk.
He waited for our return in fear,
hopefully listening to us,
scared of another beating.

He was beaten to tell lies
about us, about his fellows.
Lying battered on the ground
he never squeaked. And as he saw no escape:

we had to cut him off the bars.
He twisted his shirt around his neck.
It was the price of silence.
As he was afraid of beating, but not of death... (Vác, 1957 police lockup)

The party leadership was quite surprised by the significant role Gypsies played in the events of 1956 - as written in the minutes of party meeting -, and their actions were not left without consequences: *"Several Roma people took part in the demonstrations and in the disarmament of the police [...] In 1956, a relatively large number was engaged in counter-revolutionary events compared to their population. Due to these circumstances it is particularly important that political education among Roma people is led by communists..."* (Sághy 2008) Education

was interpreted by the power in a peculiar way; in spring 1958 a great number of Gypsies who took part in the revolution was interned in re-education camps.

The Gypsy/Roma heroes of the revolution of Hungary deserve to be remembered and regarded as patriots by the generations (Roma and not Roma) growing up.

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