Cardinal József Mindszenty Protecting the Persecuted (1945–1948)

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Cardinal József Mindszenty, archbishop of Esztergom and the last prince primate of Hungary spoke out more than once in defense of human rights and in favor of those who were persecuted for their religion, native language, nationality or ethnicity. *"József Mindszenty fully used his authority and its moral impact against violations of human rights"*, as his biographer Margit Balogh wrote.[1]

Already as bishop of Veszprém, he and József Grősz, archbishop of Kalocsa called the prime minister's (of the Interim Government) attention to the illegitimacy of deportations to Germany, to the poor conditions in the Russian prisoner camps, and to abuses against arrested clergymen. On 10 October 1945, he sent a letter of protest to Béla Miklós de Dálnok and argued against the deportation of Germans in Hungary on the principle of collective guilt. Without success, though, as the decree to relocate the German-speaking population to Germany was issued on 29 December 1945. (12.330/1945.M.E.) Via his letter dated 17 July 1946, he was the only Hungarian public authority to inform Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy about the aggressions (murders, large-scale forced expulsion) against Hungarians in Délvidék committed by the Titoist partisans.[2]

Between 1945 and 1948, Mindszenty spoke out several times against the disenfranchisement and expulsion of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia.[3] As early as 15 October 1945, just one week after his inauguration in the office of prince primate, he issued a pastoral calling the attention of Catholics and the entire Hungarian publicity to the desperate situation of the persecuted Hungarians in Csallóköz. In the pastoral, he explained that distressing news were coming from the northern part of his diocese, recently returned under Czechoslovakian rule. The complaints came from Catholic Hungarians *"with whom we have lived together for more than 900 years in the dear community of the sacred faith and divine traditions"*.[4] He informed about the attacks against

1 M. BALOGH, *Mindszenty József*, Budapest 2002, p. 115.

2 Ibidem, pp. 111–113.

3 For details, see: I. JANEK, *Mindszenty József tevékenysége a felvidéki magyarok megmentéséért 1945–1947 között*, in: Századok, Is. 1, 2008, pp. 153–182.

4 J. MINDSZENTY, *Hirdettem az igét. Válogatott szentbeszédek és körlevelek. 1944–1975. Válogatta Közi Horváth József*, Vaduz 1982, p. 76.

Hungarian Catholic educational institutions, schools, and church members, reporting "a vast series of expulsions, imprisonment, aggregation camps and injustice."[5]

According to the prince primate, the persecution of Hungarians wears done *"by means tried and tested on the poor Jews"*[6] and these measures violated both basic human rights and religious freedom. He concluded his public circular letter with the following: *"Why am I telling you of this painful situation, O my followers? Not with the purpose of sparking hatred in you. There is enough hatred already! This is an outrageous and terrible example of rejecting freedom rights and of abusing the weaker, which brings its own fate upon itself. It is certain that a new order that grants a life without fear and misery has yet to come. The goal is, however, rather to evoke compassion in your hearts, and neighborly love toward the victims of the atrocities, who are not only your brethren but your brothers in faith as well."*[7]

On 24 January 1946, József Mindszenty wrote to Prime Minister Zoltán Tildy (one week after Tildy had been elected president and one month before signing Czechoslovakian-Hungarian population exchange treaty). The cardinal argued that the Czechoslovakian government would intend to relocate the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia in the place of the Germans relocated from Hungary. *"As the unilateral expulsion of Hungarians in Slovakia is to be conjoined*[8] *with the expulsion of Germans in Hungary by the Czechoslovakian authorities, thus the Hungarians are rightly concerned that the relocation of Germans in Hungary is suggested by the Czechoslovakian party to the Russians so that this could make place for the Hungarians who were to be unilaterally relocated from Slovakia."*[9]

The prince primate advised the Prime Minister that the Hungarian cabinet could ask for guarantees at the Allied powers and the Allied Control Commission that the Germans were not translocated because of the Hungarians expulsed from the Felvidék. In case the Allies could not warrant this, then, as Mindszenty argued, the Hungarian government could inform the international community that they carried out the translocations under coercion from Russian, they could hinder and slow down the process or even discontinue.

The leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church spoke openly about his hope that the Felvidék could fully or partially (along ethnic borders) return to Hungary. He pointed to stopping the deportation of Germans as being a means to this, and he also opined that the Hungarian cabinet could refer to the fact that they could not receive the Hungarians to be expelled from Czechoslovakia. "[...] *It is worth considering that would it not be practical if Hungary would ask the great powers for an exemption of the translocation of Germans in Hungary. In this case for example, the Hungarians in Slovakia could not be translocated to Hungary, as there would be no room for them and thus the Hungarians would stay in Slovakian territory. If the region were not returned to Hungary imminently, future demands could be based on the Hungarian population residing there. It would surely be advantageous for Hungary if the Germans would stay residing in Hungary,*

5 Ibidem.
6 Ibidem.
7 Ibidem, p. 78.
8 Connected in purpose and organization.
9 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Magyar Országos Levéltár. Tildy Zoltán miniszterelnök iratai. XIX-A-1-d. (425/1946.ref.no.)

instead having the Hungarians from Slovakia translocated in their place, in which case this valuable land with ancient Hungarian ethnic roots would be lost forever."[10]

As early as 10 October 1945, Mindszenty warned the prime minister about the injustices against Germans, and the Catholic episcopal staff also issued a pastoral a week later, calling against the collective punishment of the Germans in the country and stating the inhumane and un-Christian nature of the expulsions, and that the new political power made scapegoats from the absolutely innocent as well.

Just as he had done not long before against the deportation of the Jews, Mindszenty also protested against the deportation of the Germans.[11] From the Csanád diocese under Bishop Endre Hamvas, Elek, Almáskamarás, Kübekháza and Újszentiván were involved in the relocations. To him Mindszenty wrote on 8 January 1946: *"On my part, I had all I could in due time to prevent the deportation of the state-loyal German-speaking populace from their places of residence. Unfortunately, with not much success."*[12] Due to similar experience, Presbyter Mihály Reibel, priest of German-inhabited Elek wrote in a petition that *"only those should be interned who can clearly be identified as Volksbundist or the trinary committee judged them as such. These days it is enough that one has a fine house or estate and he is to be robbed of his fortune."*[13]

József Mindszenty petitioned foreign minister János Gyöngyösi in a letter dated 22 July 1946. He warned the politician about a forceful re-Slovakization tendency and the Czechoslovakian officials' measures that violated rights of free language use and free religious practice. *"Of the 750,000 Hungarians in the territory of Czechoslovakia, 200,000 were coerced, by expulsion, confiscation, internment and threats, to claim themselves Slovaks. 400,000 are intended to be expatriated, according to official communication. On their 21 July meeting, the Hungarian bishops protested against both inhumane conditions before the civilized world, petitioning that the atrocities be ceased against people whose ancestors had lived on the land since the 9th century, also having human rights, as they are human. Now their mother tongue is banned in churches as well. The fact that they were glad about returning to Hungary back in 1938, with which they form a 90%-Hungarian block, this cannot be held against them. Which individual and nation would not rejoice when being able to rejoin his ancestral home?"*[14]

In the letter, the prince primate proposed that the Czechoslovakian state could, with the meditation of the victorious Allied great powers, return their Hungarian-populated territories to Hungary, which would instantly get rid of the undesired minority. According to Mindszenty, *"As Czechoslovakia does not want this block together with the human rights, it and its land should be relinquished back to Hungary. Injustice and suffering ceases on the respective sides, bringing peace to Eastern Europe. Similarly, the Hungarian bishops also speak out for the human rights of all inhabitants of the old Hungary."*[15]

10 Ibidem.

11 L. TILKOVSZKY, *Nemzetiségi politika Magyarországon a 20. században*, Debrecen 1998, p. 129.

12 Szeged-Csanádi Püspöki Levéltár. Püspöki hivatal iratai. Egyházigazgatási iratok [further only SZCSPL PHEI]. I 1. a. 35/1946.

13 Cited by Á. TÓTH, *Telepítések Magyarországon 1945–1948 között*, Kecskemét 1993, p. 83.

14 Szeged-Csanádi Püspöki Levéltár. Hagyatékok. Balogh István. IV. 8. 149.

15 Ibidem.

The prince primate's idea to rejoin the mostly Hungarian-inhabited Felvidék with Hungary was not unheard of in the Hungarian political life. On the 6 May 1946 inter-party session leading up to the peace negotiations, Auer Pál of the smallholders' party and Ferenc Farkas of the national peasant party also proposed demanding the *"regions with compact Hungarian majority"* back. Both the Communists and the Social-Democrats declined. Gyöngyösi, a smallholder's party member argued that in response of the aggressive Czechoslovakian nationalism, Hungary should accept the Hungarians form the Felvidék, but only together with their territories. If the Prague court did not favor this, they should also abandon their assimilation policy. As the minister's efforts were not supported by the labor parties, the Hungarian Communist Party and the Social-Democrat Party, he considered his resignation and left the meeting.[16]

The Paris peace treaty of 10 February 1947 concluded that there were no border changes favoring Hungary, and three Hungarian villages (Dunacsún, Oroszvár, Horvátjárfalu) and their 43 square kilometers were even annexed to Slovakia.

To protect the Hungarians in Felvidék, he wrote to Francis Spellman, archbishop of New York on 30 November 1946 and telegraphed to Bernard Griffin, archbishop of Westminster.[17] He repeated his protests against the Czechoslovakian acts against Hungarians on 5 February, 1947: he sent telegraphs to King George VI, to American president Harry S Truman and the cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, the future pope Paul VI. There were no results. This did not come as a surprise, since the delegates of the English minister of the exterior had already explained the Allied attitude about the Czechoslovakian-Hungarian border and the translocations. One of them stated that the British government would not even consider attempting to have a victorious power (the Czechoslovaks) forfeit territories to a defeated country, Hungary. He added: *"The Czechs have bad experiences with their minorities, which cannot be ignored."*[18] The second delegate claimed: *"After Munich, His Majesty's government is not in a position to berate the Czechs."*[19]

On 2 October 1947, the prince primate addressed the faithful Catholics on behalf of the whole Hungarian episcopal staff. In a pastoral letter on the deportation, the cardinal likened the deportations again to Hitler's persecution of the Jews: both that of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia and of the Germans in Hungary. He considered both of them unjust and leading to further ethnic tensions. He was especially outraged at the severe and violent nature of the expulsions.

Cardinal Mindszenty rejected the idea of collective responsibility, viewing it as going against the divine unwritten (natural) and written (revelated) law. *"The Hungarian bishops have been for long fighting a systematic and hard struggle, in an organized and dutiful manner, against any persecution of people on racial or collective basis. Just as it was with the Jews in Hitler's time, many are now removed from their even centurial residence, home and property, and forced to migrate in hardship; a hundred thousand and even millions of people are abused for their nationality and native language only. This is called*

16 I. ROMSICS, *Magyarország története a XX. században*, Budapest 2000, pp. 295–303.
17 BALOGH, pp. 114–115.
18 ROMSICS, p. 298.
19 Ibidem.

relocation. It is considered to be a primary modern method to facilitate peace, and it is forcefully carried out and executed."[20]

The pastoral named the Czechoslovakian translocations and the removal of the *"loyal people of German ethnicity"*[21] from Hungary *"a burning would for the Hungarians"*. *"In Czechoslovakia, exactly 700,000 Hungarians are being deported or driven out from the land where they had lived as separate block for nearly a thousand years above the Danube, which regions was only annexed to the new state after WW1, a mere 25 years. The translocation, even if by some embarrassing agreement of the states, is actually an expulsion and circumstances are often cruel. This is one burning would for the Hungarians."*[22]

Due to the organized events of the Mária days at the Maros River, on 23 May 1948 József Mindszenty visited Makó and met the Felvidék Hungarians relocated to Csanád county.[23] When he learned that hundreds of Catholics who were relocated to Pitvaros had attended his mass in Makó, he decided to visit them. More than 700 welcomed the cardinal. According to the press of the time, *"the prince primate urged the believers to become apostles of exemplarily virtuous lives and pure family home, committed to the faith and the church"*.[24]

In the North Csanád region, in Pitvaros, Ambrózfalva, and Csanádalberti, the majority was traditionally Lutheran (and Slovakian nationality). No Catholic, only Lutheran parish operated in the two larger settlements, Pitvaros and Csanádalberti.[25] The spiritual needs of the Catholics in the village was taken care of by the presbyter of the neighboring Csanádpalota, Ferenc Havadi and his chaplain, Béla Gyurkovics.[26]

In April 1947, Bishop Endre Hamvas instructed Ferenc Havadi, the priest of Csanádpalota, to make sure that the newcomers *"receive a proper welcome and pastoral attention"*.[27] In his letter to the bishop, the priest mentioned the Hungarians who arrived to Pitvaros after having lost their homeland. *"The settlers came in a truly sad mood. I did my best to console them, as they are very disheartened."*[28] Then he explained that those who arrived first had more freedom to bring their belongings, but those who were transported later could bring only some tools or equipment. Taking the importance of the issue into account, Bishop Imre Csepregi appointed the pastor in Makó as the episcopal commissioner of inward and outward relocations and he expected regular reports. A large number of Catholic Germans had to leave the area of the Csanád diocese, and the leaving Lutheran Slovaks were replaced by Catholic Hungarians.

20 MINDSZENTY, p. 161.

21 Ibidem.

22 Ibidem.

23 For details, see: P. MIKLÓS, *A csehszlovák-magyar lakosságcsere Csanád vármegyei történetéhez*, in: I. T'TH (Ed.), *Múzeumi kutatások Csongrád megyében 2007*, Szeged 2008, pp. 93–100; N. M. PELESZ, *A csehszlovák–magyar lakosságcsere története és következményei Pitvaroson*, in: Belvedere Meridionale, Is. 5–8, 2007, pp. 88–94.

24 Új Ember, issue 20 May 1948.

25 For details, see: P. KOMOLY, *Pitvarosi tanulmányok*, Szeged 1992, pp. 178–217; J. KUGLER, *Lakosságcsere a Délkelet-Alföldön*, Budapest 2000, pp. 113–159.

26 J. PÁL, *Hamvas Endre csanádi püspök és a felvidéki magyarok. 1945–1948*, in: Szegedi Műhely, Is. 1–4, 1993–1994, pp. 93–105.

27 SZCSPL PHEI I. 1. a. 888/1947.

28 Ibidem.

The Hungarians who had been driven out from Gúta[29] and then resettled in Pitvaros were visited by their priest, the Gúta pastor László Beltovszky and he spent weeks of service among them. In the summer of 1947, the local Catholics drafted a letter to demand a Catholic priest for their village and Catholic religious education for their children. *"We have been, against our will, separated not only from our ancient home but also from out priests and our church. We want to stay true to our Hungarian nationality and to our religion as well. Our brothers and sisters who were expelled with us but arrived to other villages now have a church and a spiritual father to lead them, but we, who are the most in one single block, we have no church. In the present situation, religion is our only consolation. On Sundays we are able to attend Mass, because an honorable minister comes to us, but many of us used to take the sacrament daily."*[30]

On August 10, Endre Hamvas visited his followers in Pitvaros, and he was convinced about the seriousness of their religious commitment. Soon after, on November 1, 1947, he founded a parish in Pitvaros. He appointed Kálmán Debreceni, a former field priest, as the first minister, who was not popular with the followers coming from the Felvidék, and he resigned in the April of 1948 and left the village in May. From May 1948, he was succeeded by a young pastor from Makó, Ferenc Kiss, who quickly got along with his new congregation and keenly began to organize the community and to build the church and the parish building.

The prince primate's efforts in the protection of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia has been briefly presented, his letters to Zoltán Tidly and János Gyöngyösi were cited and we have also presented his act of pastoral care toward the Felvidék Hungarians resettled in Pitvaros. It is my hope that these provide further support to Margit Balogh's words on Mindszenty: *"In shocked and outraged tone, he petitioned and demanded, again and again calling out to government members, arguing with rational proposals and acting on human conscience and compassion as well."*[31]

Cardinal József Mindszenty's unrivaled determination to protect the persecuted was, however, met with disregard, due to the formation of Soviet-type dictatorships in Central Europe.

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29 Cf. B. ANGYAL, *Gúta: 1945–1949*, Dunaszerdahely 2007, pp. 81–138.

30 SZCSPL PHEI I. 1. a. 888/1947.

31 BALOGH, p. 115.