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“Typhus Fever” in the ghetto of Nagyvárad: The scam that saved Béla Zsolt and others¹

(Translated from Hungarian by Ladislaus Löb)

The following occurrence in the ghetto of Nagyvárad (today Oradea in Romania) is unique in the history of the Hungarian Holocaust: following an idea of the gynaecologist Dr Miksa Kupfer, a number of captives pretended to have contracted typhus fever and were left in the ghetto instead of being deported. An “isolation hospital” was set up at the south-eastern edge of the ghetto, on the premises of what used to be the László Mill. Seven of the individuals present were supposed to have typhus fever and twenty-four to be suspected cases. Two others had hidden in the attic, where they were supplied with food by the master baker Steiner, till they managed to escape.²

The group consisted of the following: Miksa Kupfer’s wife, the physician Dr Erzsébet Czeisler; the pediatrician Dr Sándor Bálint (the second organiser of the group) and his wife, posing as a nurse; Dr Kupfer’s mother Rozália and his younger son Rafael; Dr Bálint’s sister-in-law and his nephew Emil Waldman; the teenager Bubi Pisztniner; the furniture wholesaler Ernő Schwarcz with his family; and some Polish refugees.³ One of the children, Jancsi Schwarcz, later became chief engineer of a pharmaceutical company in Israel.⁴ The most prestigious member of the Orthodox contingent was the Bobover Rebbe, who had set out west with his entire court when the persecution of the Jews began, and was caught by the ghettoisation in Nagyvárad. Other Orthodox “patients” were Chaim Katz and his famously beautiful wife Cita Seidenfrau; the “wonder rabbi” Halberstein; and the daughter of the rabbi of Vizsnice. The Orthodox spoke Yiddish among themselves. The Hassidic Leimsieder couple with their many children were put up in the “monitoring department”.⁵

The celebrity among the “typhus patients” was Béla Zsolt (originally called Béla Steiner), the famous Budapest writer, poet and journalist, accompanied by his wife, Ágnes Rácz, who hailed from Nagyvárad. Sadly, they had been unable to take Éva Heyman, Ágnes’s thirteen-year-old daughter by her first marriage, with them to the hospital. The girl, who is known as the “Hungarian Anne Frank” because of a diary she left behind, was deported from Nagyvárad ghetto and her short life ended in Auschwitz. Back in Budapest

after the war, Zsolt described the appalling conditions in the ghetto and the rescue of the “patients” in his autobiographical novel *Nine Suitcases*.⁶

The “patients” also included the master baker Steiner, who had been admitted to the hospital as chef thanks to the intervention of the Deputy Ghetto Commander, and whose family at the last moment was granted permission to stay with him. His son, Róbert Steiner, twelve at the time, later changed his name to Reuven Tsur and became a world-famous literary theoretician in Israel.⁷ He described the family’s escape from Nagyvárád to Romania in an exciting novel, published first in Hebrew and in 2005 in Hungarian, entitled *Szökés a gettóból* (Flight from the ghetto), in the Villanyváros series.⁸ Róbert’s sister Márta Steiner, on the run with her family as a child, is now a physician in London.⁹ Other sources name further fugitives hiding in the “typhus hospital”.¹⁰

A crucial role in the isolation and retention of the “patients” in the ghetto was played by the Christian pathologist and chief medical officer Dr Konrád Beöthy. The blood samples of the “patients” were sent to the laboratory of this humane professor, who confirmed the presence of antibodies that were not there. He hoped that the whole ghetto would be declared to be in quarantine, which would have resulted in the suspension of the deportations.¹¹ This far-reaching plan was thwarted by the Ghetto Command, but the “typhus hospital”, at least, was allowed to stay put. “It stood like a lonely island in the evacuated ghost town of the ghetto”, Reuven Tsur recalls.¹²

The group left behind in the ghetto communicated with the world outside through the gendarmerie sergeant Gyula Ladi, a kind young peasant from Transdanubia, who decided to help of his own free will, without any financial reward.¹³ Whenever some Orthodox Jews were found hiding in the area of the ghetto Ladi informed Dr Kupfer, and in most cases the hideaways were admitted to the hospital for “observation” on “suspicion of being infectious”. Consequently the number of “patients” grew week by week.¹⁴

Once the ghetto had been evacuated, the gendarmes, who had carried out their orders with cruel rigour, were transferred, leaving the “patients” in the hands of a command consisting of a few officers and NCO’s, and the police. It was then that the hat manufacturer Ignác Deutsch was brought into the “hospital”. He reported that on 8 June the ghetto had been reestablished in the riding hall in Füzés Street for Jews being rounded up in the northern part of Bihar county (which Hungary had been permitted to keep by the Treaty of Trianon). This was taken as an omen, and most of the “patients” decided to flee to Romania as soon as possible. Their plans were probably supported by Mihai Marina, the Romanian consul in Nagyvárád and his staff. They were provided with food and other necessities for their journey

by Count Kálmán Tisza junior in Gest, Hungary, and Count György Tisza in Cighid, Romania.¹⁵ They also received help from Dr Kupfer's friend, Dr Ter□an of Nagyvárad.¹⁶

What happened to the “patients” after their escape from the ghetto

After escaping from the ghetto, most of the “typhus patients” managed to cross the border into Romania, but were arrested by military patrols, convicted of illegal entry and interned till the end of the war. I have been able to ascertain the details from archival documents.

One group crossed the border on 24 June 1944 at Biharsályi, a village near the Hungarian spa of Félixfürdő, but in Romanian territory.¹⁷ At Tenke (Tinca) station, they bought tickets for the train to Arad, but only got as far as Illye (Ciomeghiu), where they were arrested by the local border police. According to the records, the fugitives in question were the following: Dr Martin (i.e. Miksa) Kupfer, his wife Dr Erzsébet Czeisler, their son Rafael Kupfer, and Dr Kupfer's seventy-seven year old mother Rozália; the other organiser of the “typhus hospital”, Dr Sándor Bálint, with his wife, Rozália née Vogel; and Oszkár Kahán, a student aged sixteen from Nagyvárad, who had entered Romania on his own. He had crossed the border at Telkesd (Tilecuş) on 3 June, spent several days hiding in the forest of Harangmező (Hidişelu de Sus), bought a ticket at Tasádfő (Tăşad) station and been arrested, with the others, at Illye station.¹⁸

The Kupfer and Bálint families were charged in the Court of Arad with illegal border crossing and on 15 July 1944 – together with other fugitives – sentenced to be detained in Târgu Jiu internment camp. The inmates of Târgu Jiu were mainly individuals convicted of political crimes, ranging from legionnaires opposed to the Antonescu regime at one end of the scale to communists at the other. On arrival in Târgu Jiu the illegal refugees had to undergo a physical search, have their fingerprints taken, and fill in a convict's form, before being allocated their quarters, men and women in separate barracks.¹⁹ A record of their capture was prepared, and a duplicate sent to the Gendarmerie Command of the Romanian Bihor county in Belényes (Beiuş). As most of these records have been preserved, many of the fugitives can be identified by name, place of birth, place of residence, education and occupation.

In the limited space available I will list only people from Nagyvárad and some others closely connected to them.

Several of these were indicted of illegal border-crossing at the same time as the Kupfer and Bálint families. One was Ibolya Rosenberg, a twenty-three-year old humanities student

from Nagyvárád. According to the police records she had crossed the border at Biharszentelek (Sântelec) on 9 July (that is, more than a month after the liquidation of the ghetto) and was arrested by a patrol one day later when she was trying to buy a ticket at Tinca station.²⁰ The court records contain the name of Éva Haskielberg²¹, a Polish national who had escaped from Nyíregyháza and crossed the border into Romania at Harangmező on 6 July.²² Rosenberg and Haskielberg were both sent to Târgu Jiu on 14 July by the Military Command of Bihor county with a transcript signed by Lieutenant-Colonel Ștefan Rusu.²³ Rosenberg's case is particularly interesting because she had managed to hide in Nagyvárád or its neighbourhood for more than a month after the deportations.

Júlia Schwartz of Nagyvárád, a housewife of fifty-four, crossed the border at Biharszentelek on 9 July 1944 and was arrested by a Romanian patrol at Tasnádfő.²⁴ According to her testimony some of her children were living in Bucharest, while her son in Nagyvárád had been deported, so that she was alone with nobody to take care of her.²⁵ The record does not explain how she had avoided ghettoisation when her son was taken away. According to two different documents the Gendarmerie Command of Bihor had paid her 2,441 lei to cover her various travel expenses.²⁶

But let us return to the fugitives from the “typhus hospital”. Some, rather than fleeing to Romania, chose to take refuge in the Hungarian capital. The writer Béla Zsolt and his wife Ágnes Rácz received Christian documents, specially brought by a lady from Budapest.²⁷ These false papers had probably been obtained for them by their relative Sándor Kaufmann, who was a manager of the Hotel Pannónia in Budapest.²⁸ With Ágnes Rácz disguised as a peasant woman, the couple travelled to Budapest, accompanied by the lady who had brought them the documents, and eventually reached Switzerland by the “Kasztner train”, a rescue transport negotiated with the SS by the Kolozsvár lawyer Rezső Kasztner.²⁹ Six other individuals also joined the “Kasztner group”. Owing to the intervention of Fülöp Freudiger, one of the most influential members of the Budapest Jewish Council, they were allowed to travel to Budapest from Nagyvárád on 6 June, escorted by two gendarmes. They were Sándor Leitner, the president of the Orthodox community, with his family and Mrs István Ullmann, widow of a former president, with her son. They were taken with the rest of the “Kasztner group” to the special camp of Bergen-Belsen and eventually released to Switzerland. Sándor Leitner died in Geneva in 1972, aged eighty-two.³⁰ After the war his daughter Marianne settled in Israel and his son Felix in the USA.³¹

The Steiner family left the ghetto by bribing the guards. At the exit they were met by a high-ranking police officer, who guided them to their hiding place, refusing the offer of

money. Gheorge Mangra, the head of a Christian school, had obtained forged papers for them and planned their escape. His nephew, Dimitru (or Dumitru) Mangra, led the two Steiner children out of the city and smuggled them into Romania at Püspökfürdő, where he put them on a train. Eventually they found themselves in the military prison of Temesvár (Timișoara) together with other Jewish fugitives from Hungary.³²

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NOTES

¹ Extract from the author's monograph of Nagyvárad, *Az úri város zsidó lakosai* (The Jews of the Genteel City). In progress.

² Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*, 55-56.

³ Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*, 55-56. The source states wrongly that Dr Czeisler's elderly parents were also there. Electronic communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Löwy, Budapest, 29 January 2008.

⁴ Electronic communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Löwy, Budapest, 29 January 2008.

⁵ Tsur, *Menekülés*, 86.

⁶ Zsolt, *Kilenc koffer*.

⁷ Reuven Tsur (originally Róbert Steiner), Emeritus Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, creator of Cognitive Poetics, was born in 1932 in Nagyvárad. As a child he was imprisoned in the ghetto of Nagyvárad with his family, but escaped deportation as part of the group of "typhus fever patients". After emigrating to Israel

he was director of the Katz Research Institute for Hebrew Literature for several years. See: <http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/> (7 December 2005.)

⁸ Tsur, Reuven: *Menekülés a gettóból: egy nagyváradi zsidó család története* (Escape from the Ghetto: The Story of a Jewish Family of Nagyvárad). (Budapest: Noran Könyvek, 2005.)

⁹ Electronic communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Lőwy, Budapest, 29 January 2008.

¹⁰ One source mentions Ernő Schwarcz's brother-in-law, the bank employee Péter Molnár with his family, and the journalist Sándor Fleischer with his wife and young child (Fleischer worked for the journal *Nagyvárad* as political and social reporter, see Osvát, *Erdélyi Lexikon*, 113). Another source lists: Katalin Deutsch, the merchant Mór Friedler, the importer Sándor Goldstein, the owner-manager of the Uránia cotton wool factory, Dr Lajos Jakab, the spectacle manufacturer Imre Róth and his wife, Sándor Sonnenwirth, Dr Alfréd Bock, the merchant Adolf Lefkovics with his six children, Andor Weisz, the dentist Károly Ackersmann, the clerk István Adler, the furniture wholesaler Ernő Schwarcz and – once more – Schwarcz's brother-in-law, the bank employee Péter Molnár (both with their families), further Jenő Feldmesser, Lajos Feldmesser, Lajos Schwarcz, Dr Vilmos Bársony, and Miklós Gyarmati, in hiding since before ghettoisation (see Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*, 56). However, Professor Reuven Tsur is certain that Dr Bársony was not in the “typhus hospital” and almost certain that the two Feldmessers, whom he knew personally, were not there either (Communication from Professor Reuven Tsur to Dániel Lőwy, 20 January 2008.)

¹¹ Knowing Dr Konrád Beöthy's uncommon helpfulness, it is difficult to accept the charge of “anti-Semitic utterances” levelled against his wife after the war.

¹² Tsur, *Menekülés*, 87.

¹³ Mózes, *Váradi zsidók*, 222; Tsur, *Menekülés*, 89-90; communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Lőwy, Budapest, 5 December 2004.

¹⁴ Tsur, *Menekülés*, 89-90.

¹⁵ Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*, 56.

¹⁶ Electronic communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Lőwy, Budapest, 29 January 2008. See also Mózes, *Evacuation of the Ghetto*, 123.

¹⁷ The Romanian name of the village is Șauaieu; it belongs to the commune of Nagyürögd (Nojorid) which was returned to Hungary after the Second Vienna Award. See: Árpád, *Erdély felekezeti statisztikája*.

¹⁸ Transcript no. 587 of Garnizoana Tinca (Tenke Garrison) to Curtea Marțială Timișoara (Timișoara Court-Martial). 25 June 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111-112. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2, 133-134.

¹⁹ Szabó, *Însemnări*. 117-118.

²⁰ Report no. 711 of Garnizoana Tinca Bihorului (Tenke Garrison) to the Bihor Gendarmerie Command. 10 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111-112. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. 117.

²¹ Lagărul de Internați Politici Tg.-Jiu către Legiunea Jandarmi Bihor (Transcript of Tg. Jiu prison for political convicts to the Bihor Gendarmerie Command). No. 5193/18 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111-112. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2.

²² The police record refers to *Hidișelu* (with a typo that turns it into *Hidișeu*, which does not exist in Transylvania). Even Hidișelu is ambiguous, because there are two locations of that name, Hidișelu de Sus (Hungarian Harangmező) and Hidișelu de Jos (Almamezö). Both are in Bihar county and both belonged to Romania during the war. See: Varga, *Erdély felekezeti statisztikája*. – According to several records a number of Polish Jews escaped to Romania from Nyíregyháza. Among them were Eduard Wismewski and Alfred Staimetz, two Polish citizens, the former a resident of Nyíregyháza, the latter of Budapest. They crossed into Romania at Biharsályi on 14 July 1944. According to a statement to the Tinca garrison they had escaped from persecution by the Hungarian authorities and they intended to stay in Romania, where they hoped they would be safer. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 123-125. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. Mrs Rozália Haber Klein, a Hungarian national coming from Budapest, crossed the Romanian border at Harangmező with her son, Róbert, aged three and a half. They were arrested on 9 July and the records were completed on the following day at Tinca. Ibid. 126-128.

²³ Transcript no. 10.915 of the Bihor Gendarmerie Command to Tg. Jiu camp. 14 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. 5-6.

²⁴ Report no. 710 of Garnizoana Tinca Bihorului (Tenke Garrison) to Bihor Gendarmerie Command. 10 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 120. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. 18-19.

²⁵ Transcript of the Bihor Gendarmerie Command to the camp of Tg. Jiu No. 16.914. 14 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111-112. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. 119.

²⁶ Certificate of Bihor Gendarmerie, bearing the seal of Gendarmerie Lieutenant-Colonel Ștefan Rusu. 14 July 1944. România Arhivele Naționale (Romanian National Archives), D.A.N.I.C. Direcția Județeană Bihor, Fond: Legiunea de Jandarmi Bihor, 1931-1949. No. 48, Inv. 32, Dosar nr. 12/1944 fila 111-112. USHMM, RG-25.042M, Reel 2. 121-122.

²⁷ Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*. 56.

²⁸ Frojimovics – Molnár, *A Világ Igazai*. 206.

²⁹ Ötvös-Horvát, *Porrá és hamuvá*. 56.

³⁰ Schön, *Tegnap városa*. 319.

³¹ Electronic communication from Pál Réz to Dániel Löwy, Budapest, 28 January 2008.

³² Tsur, *Menekülés*. 105-125.