

NO.414

"B5" FACESHEET AND RATING

SB p.1

July 1957

~~Heldreflas~~ Innsbruck

1. In-14
2. [REDACTED]
3. Innsbruck
4. 40
5. M
6. Hungarian
7. Lutheran
8. Lutheran
9. Married
10. ---
11. Economist
12. Independent businessman
13. ---
14. Middle Class
15. ~~Zentraler~~ in Reserves, 1944 (Corporal)
16. Europe and North Africa, before WW II
17. Yes
18. No
19. Keleti Akademia, Budapest
20. Budapest
21. Budapest
22. Pest
23. Social Democrat
24. 17 Nov 1956
25. Innsbruck
26. Canada
27. No
28. No
29. ---
31. "10"
32. "5"
33. "10"
34. "5"

Interviewer first asked respondent to tell something about his life:

"My father was Chief Inspector in the central offices of MAV, the Hungarian State Railways. He is still alive, he is 78 now and is living in Budapest. My mother died in 1918 when I was 1 year old. My education was entrusted to one of my aunts, a very balanced person. My father was very nice to me, but I would say that it was my aunt who raised me. My family comes from Upper Hungary, what is Slovakia today, and we are Lutherans. After my maturation in 1935 I studied for two years at the Oriental Academy in Budapest. Then I enrolled at the University of Economics in Budapest, but I did not finish it. I am not the scholarly type. I am rather a practical man. I was interested in business. My chances in the field of business were enhanced by the anti-Semitic trend in Hungary towards the end of the '30s. I first entered the Budapest offices of the IG Farbenindustrie. For a while I worked also in the Berlin office of the concern. The so-called ~~aryan~~isation of Hungarian economic life gave me a break. I was only 23 years old when I managed to become an independent businessman. With a Jewish friend of mine, who was much older than I, about 40, his name is Istvan Wittenberg, I started a retail store in paperware and photo materials, in 1940.

It was a typical "~~Stoman~~" business. I did not know much about business at that time and I had only a little saving. My Jewish partner, on the other hand, had money and also the business know-how. Another partner was Laszlo Sebestyen. He did not contribute capital to our business, but as director of the first Hungarian paper concern he had great experience. We did very well during the war years until the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944. My Jewish partner Wittenberg was arrested by the German Nazis, but ultimately he succeeded in surviving the Nazi occupation. After March 1944 I had liquidated my business. In 1940 I entered the military service. I served in the Air Force and left the service in 1942 as an officer in the reserves. I was exempted from further service on account of a knee injury. In 1943 I was married. We had a little boy who died during the war. I was strongly anti-Nazi and anti-German. My friends were leftist intellectuals. I liked to mingle with writers and newspaper men and these contacts had a marked influence on me. In 1943 I became a secret member of the Social Democratic Party in Hungary. My leftist interests were enhanced in particular by one of my early friends, Dr. Janos Wolff. He was a genius. He spoke great many languages. Among them Russian. And in 1940/41, when the Soviets had diplomatic relations with Hungary and maintained a legation in Budapest, I went with my friend Wolff several times to the Soviet legation.

My friend Wolff was interested in Russian books and he received them in great quantity from the Soviet legation. Out of curiosity rather than political interest, I got interested in the Soviet Union at that time. Altho, no doubt, my strong anti-Nazi and anti-German feelings had much to do with my leftist orientation, I considered the leftist ideology far superior to the pro-Nazi and pro-German current, then prevalent in Hungary. After the German occupation of Hungary in 1944 I did much to help my Jewish friends and acquaintances. My pro-Soviet sympathies were especially strong during that period. I expected Hungary to be liberated ^{from Nazi} by the Soviets. Like most of my friends, including experienced businessmen, who knew more about politics than I did, we all trusted the Soviet Union. We did not anticipate a Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe. We envisaged even the continuation of the capitalist economic system after Soviet liberation. We thought the Soviets will withdraw from Hungary after Germany's defeat and there will be no interference with Hungarian independence. The reasons for these optimistic views were easy to understand. After all, this was a war against Germany and the Soviet Union was an ally in the war against Germany. Also, I trusted in the Soviet Allies because of my trust in American policy. Since the United States were an ally of Soviet Russia, I thought everything will go alright after the war.

Of course I realize now that we knew little of the Soviets. Now, to go back to my life's story: Following the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, as I have said, I liquidated my business and was living on my savings which were considerable. My inventory was substantial, was however destroyed during the English-American air raids in June and July. The house where I had stored the inventory was completely demolished. On October 7th, 1944, I was called up for military service. I was stationed around Győr in Szeged. One of my friends there, Lieutenant ~~Frank~~ ^{Geza} Horvath, had asked me to go with him to ~~Karcag~~ ^{Karcag} in Eastern Hungary, where he had left his son. He was concerned for him, because of the approaching Russians. I did not like the idea, but finally went with him. We took a car. I had with me my own fortune and also the fortune of my friend Wittenberg, mostly in gold. We went to Budapest first. I saw my wife there. Then we continued our trip Eastwards. At that time the front was rather fluid and we did not know exactly where the Russians were. We proceeded in the direction of Füzegyháza, inquiring the village people about the position of the Russians. They said we can safely proceed, and so we did. But just before Füzegyháza we ran into the Russians. I pulled out my card identifying me as a member of the Social Democratic Party and tried to explain in broken Russian that I'm a friend, altho I am in the uniform of the Hungarian Air Force. I argued in vain and both, my friend Horvath and myself, were taken prisoners.

They took us first to Arad in Rumania. Then farther East to Brasso into a prison camp. Later I was taken to Focsani. In the meantime I succeeded to get civilian clothes, for ~~the~~ other ~~reasons~~ ^{reasons, too but also} because the Russians took away my overcoat and jacket. I was only in shirt and I was freezing. I should mention also, that the Russians took away all the fortune I was carrying in the car, when we fell into their hands. In the Focsani Camp I had a very unpleasant incident. In the camp there were many Jewish forced laborers from the Bori mines in Yugoslavia. They were prisoners too. It mattered little to the Russians that these Jews were persecuted by the Nazis. One of the Jewish prisoners, eager to please the Russians, revealed my identity, disclosing that I am a Hungarian pilot officer. His motivation was no doubt revenge and hatred against the Christian Hungarians. Thereupon I was summoned before the Camp Commander and was beaten up. I denied, however, that I was a pilot officer, because the rumor was that all civilians will be released and I wanted to be among them, needless to say. My refusal to admit my identity did not help, however. The Russians soon shipped us further East to the Ukraine. During the trip, which was terrible, I attempted twice to escape. Both attempts failed. Each time I was captured, beaten up and returned to the prison train. We travelled 70 men in one car. Many died on the way and the dead bodies remained with us for days. We were sitting on them.

I got sick during the trip and was taken off the train in Charkov. While trying to explain who I am, the Russians got the idea that I was a journalist. I was speaking namely, or trying to speak, about my contacts with writers and journalists, leftist circles in Hungary. I accepted happily my status as a journalist, which gave me a better treatment. The Russians namely have a great respect for writers. I was assigned to a village called Budjansk, to work in an office of a prisoner camp. This was in December 1944 and I stayed in Budjansk until May 1946. My release from Budjansk was the work of my good friend Dr. Wolff. But I learned about it only afterwards. Wolff became an interpreter after the liberation in the office of Marshal Woroshilov in Budapest. He succeeded in getting a letter from Marshal Woroshilov, ordering my release, but I was identified in that letter as a pilot officer. I should explain that I succeeded to send a letter to my wife and tell her about my whereabouts. I did not know, of course, about Wolff's action when I was summoned to the NKVD in Charkov. They were interrogating me several times, trying to prove that I was a pilot officer. I denied that. I did not know of course, that the reason why they are trying to identify me as a pilot officer is merely because the letter from Woroshilov arrived, ordering my release and the order identified me as a pilot officer. After much interrogation, when I realized that they don't mean harm if I confess that I am a pilot officer, I signed a paper revealing my identity and I was immediately released.

The whole story became clear to me only after my return to Budapest. From Charkov I was taken first to Odessa, where I received the usual rehabilitation treatment from the Russians. Good food, decent lodging. This they did to all important people whom they decided to release, and I was an important person, only I did not know at that time on what grounds. From Odessa I returned to Budapest under Russian escort in the spring of 1946. After arriving in Budapest late at night, I asked my escort to take me to my friend Wolff's apartment. When we arrived there, my friend Wolff with his fluent Russian chased away my Russian escort. This was easy for him to do because he had a paper identifying him as the interpreter of Marshal Voroshilov, and the Russians were happy to leave anyway. I took two months rest and then went into business again. This was a time when black market was flourishing in Hungary. I succeeded to get a truck and did pretty well on the black market. This was a time when private business was not curtailed yet. So I went back into my earlier trade, paper. With Wittenberg's help I became secretary of the Hungarian Paper Trust. Apart from that I also became partner in all sorts of business speculations. I had a nice apartment again, my only sorrow was that I learned that my wife gave birth to a son during my absence and that my son died shortly after the siege of Budapest.

In the summer of 1946 the Hungarian currency was stabilized, business was good, I did well, I had a car, I was optimistic about the future. I had resumed also my political connections with the Social Democratic Party and was active in the Party's effort to get the prisoners of war released. This was an important issue at that time because the party that succeeded to do most for the prisoners of war could count on ~~its~~ popularity. The Communists took the lead as protectors of the prisoners of war and the Social Democratic Party was anxious to catch up with the Communists. But this was just the beginning of the conflict with the Communists. My former trusts in the Soviets had been shaken ^{already due to} ~~by~~ ~~my~~ ~~prisoner of war~~ ~~prisoner~~ experiences. I made a report to the Social Democratic Party on the PW situation in Russia, pointing out that tens of thousands of prisoners perished due to bad treatment. These excursions into politics did not absorb however, much of my time or interest; primarily I was absorbed with my business activities. The decisive turning point came in 1948, when all hopes for a bright future had been shattered. The Communists took over the rule and the terror began. My business activities came to an end. My friend Wolff left Hungary already in 1947. He tried to convince me to leave Hungary, but I saw at that time no need to do so. Now, a year later, I regretted that I did not go. As I found out later, the Russian friends of Wolff suggested him to leave the country.

To escape illegally seemed to me a too risky an adventure. So I stayed and tried to survive. I became an opportunist, I have no illusions about that. To begin with, I became a member of the Hungarian Workers Party, the new name of the Communist Party after its fusion with the Social Democrats. Following the fusion, when a membership revision took place in 1949, I was excluded from the Party as a former ~~Horthy~~ ^{Horthy} officer. I appealed the decision however, and succeeded to restore my Party membership. As a restored Party member actually my position was better than that of the regular Party members.

What helped me in restoring my membership was Woroshilov's order that released me from Russian captivity. I took as much advantage as I could of this incident in my life. I was a Party member in good standing. The Party trusted me and I received a position in the Kisosiz, which was the organization of the independent, small businessmen. My sympathy however, was on the side of the businessmen and not on the side of the Party. I helped the businessmen whenever I could, especially in notifying them about the intentions of the gov't to nationalize the business firms. Knowing about the impending nationalization of their business firms, the owners could save a part of their business at least, by liquidating it on time. With the rapid advance of nationalization of private business, my position at the Kisosiz lost its significance and in 1951 I left the organization. Now I entered the nationalized business life.

For a year or so I was in the Ministry of Internal Trade. The section I was working at was entrusted with the **prevention and suppression** of corruption. My career in the state-owned business continued a year later, in 1952, when I joined as section chief the commercial company providing the communities with sport items, musical instruments and furniture. This was a new company that was formed at that time. We were in charge of distribution. The company has undergone several reorganizations during the next years, but I kept my job as section chief. This was an important agency, which employed only reliable party members. How reliable we were, I would point out that the management of the company left en bloc Hungary after the Revolution. We had a nice office on the ~~Andrassy~~ ^{Andrassy} Street, in a villa, a former villa, of Count Harkanyi. The manager was Andras Kovacs, an experienced Jewish businessman. He is now in the United States, in St. Louis. It was a pleasant place to work. ~~purported~~ ^{purported} We ~~resented~~ to be supporters of the regime, we all were wearing masks. We worked at least 10 hours a day, but the effective work was not more than 2 or 3 hours a day. The rest of the time was taken up with all sorts of activities, including doing your own business; especially after 1953, when the private sector of the economy, which had been ~~revived,~~ ^{revived,} ~~maximized~~ there was much we did to help the independent businessmen. This was not legal and was not done openly. But the top management at least, knew about it and it became an established practice.

Needless to say that favors rendered to independent businessmen were earning for us smaller or greater rewards. This was institutionalized corruption; often I made more on the side than my regular salary has been. This practice was made possible due to the fact that there were very few convinced Communists in our office. I would estimate them about 1%. In spite of widespread corruption our office had the best reputation. Credit should be given for that to our manager, Mr. Kovacs, who was an excellent businessman and outwardly at least, a reliable supporter of the regime. But in his own way he was actually a believer in the regime. He was a Jew and he was grateful to the Communists and the Soviet Union for saving his life ^{But} ~~and~~ the illegal practices at our office were actually beneficial to the Hungarian economy. It was a sort of corruption which was good for the country. People who served this way the regime, actually did more good to the country than for instance Mrs. Marik at our working place, who was the Party stewardess, a former janitoress, not knowing anything about business."

Interviewer next asked respondent about his income:

"My monthly salary was 2,000 ft., but I made on the side about 2,000 - 3,000 ft. a month. My wife had a research job at the University and she made 1,000 - 2,000 ft., so altogether we had between 5,000 to 6,000 ft., which was quite sufficient."

Interviewer asked respondent about the position of the Jews and the state of anti-Semitism in Hungary:

"The Jews occupy a dominant position in communist Hungary. In all the segments of the country's life, whether political, economic or cultural. There is a terrific anti-Semitism. Even people like myself, who associated themselves with the Jews and are of course willing to make exceptions, are filled with anti-Semitic sentiments. It is a real miracle that this anti-Semitism did not reveal itself during the Revolution. There was no anti-Semitism during the Revolution. I explain this fact by the following: The success of the Revolution made the Hungarians so overwhelmed with joy that they neither paid attention to the Jews nor were they in the mood for revenge. On the contrary, there was a willingness to forgive the Jews. Nevertheless, as I said, the future of the Jews in Hungary is gloomy. As long as the regime lasts they can keep their positions, and perhaps they will act in the future more cautiously than they did in the past. I don't know whether this will be helpful. Much will depend under what circumstances the regime will end."

Interviewer asked respondent about his own opportunism:

"You have to realize that we gave up hope for immediate changes. We were hopeful, of course, that the Communist rule will not last forever, but we did not know when and how it will change. Therefore we adjusted ourselves the way we could."

This is how I explain my own opportunism. I tried to create the impression that I am a reliable supporter and a good Party member. I participated in the endless meetings of the Party. I signed the loans and in my private life I was avoiding people whom I did not trust. In my experience this kind of double life I was living was not so difficult. All my friends in private life were reactionaries, so-called, but there were so many reactionaries that it was safe to be a reactionary."

Interviewer asked respondent why he left Hungary:

"The longing was growing in me, and in my wife too, to end this life of lies well before the Revolution. Just on the eve of the Revolution, on October 13th, I went to Vienna to attend a football match between Austria and Hungary. The experience of free life in Vienna strengthened my longing to leave and actually we decided to go West before the Revolution. Another motivation was, after the collapse of the Revolution, the fear of renewed terror, which we thought will be worse than the one after the Communists took over the rule of Hungary following the second World War. Also, news about how the West was supporting the refugees, encouraged us. Finally, knowing myself, I was rather confident that I will survive in the West. I was not concerned about my future. I should add that I was born in that part of Hungary, which is now part of Austria, and I thought that on that basis I will be able to settle down in Austria without difficulty.

Also, I had many friends abroad and I knew that they would be willing to come to my assistance if I needed it. To sum it up, I did not want to face a new period of my life which was to be based on lies. I had the feeling that the kind of opportunistic life I was living, I could not do again. I was fed up with it."

INTERVIEWER'S RATING: I have known, superficially tho, respondent in Budapest, and we greeted each other as former friends. Rapport was excellent. I doubt, however, respondent's frankness. His obvious intention was to explain away his opportunism. In any case, his career is an interesting example how a member of the former intelligentsia, the former middle class, could survive and do pretty well under the communist regime.