

CHAPTER ONE

Dealing with Dictators

*Fundamental Choices
in the Lutheran Church in Hungary, 1945–49*

Oh my people, your leaders mislead you,
and confuse the course of your paths.

—ISAIAH 3:12



World War II ended for Hungary early in April 1945, when Russian troops drove out the last of the occupying German army. For the second time in the twentieth century, as so many times in its history, this small nation-state, roughly the size of Indiana, had become a theater for greater powers to resolve their greater interests. Approximately 115,000 Hungarian soldiers died in service of those greater interests—but, considering the numbers, Hungarian civilians may not have been better off. Within the borders of present-day Hungary, approximately 80,000 civilians died. Somewhere between 400,000 to 600,000 Jews and 50,000 gypsies had been deported, then killed in Nazi concentration camps. From Sub-Carpathia (Ukraine), 80,000 Hungarians were deported, and 20,000 of them were killed. In the southern Bachka region (now part of Yugoslavia), 40,000 Hungarians were killed. In Transylvania, although there are no official figures, certainly thousands of civilians died. Another 200,000 Hungarian prisoners of war, not all of them soldiers, died in Soviet prison camps. Totaled, more than 900,000 Hungarians died in the Second World War, which, counting roughly, was about 8 percent of all Hungarians living in Europe.

The war also caused tremendous material damage. As a consequence of battles and looting, Hungary's national income in 1945 shrunk 40 percent. Between 45 and 60 percent of Hungarian livestock was decimated, 90 percent of factories were seriously damaged, and 40 percent of railway lines and 70 percent of railway cars were destroyed. In Budapest 30,000 apartments were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable, and another 48,000 were seriously damaged. The city, including its famous bridges, the hotels along the Danube, and the Buda Castle, was in ruins.¹

Standing among the rubble after the war, Hungarians must have been uncertain about the future. "Old Hungary"—the thousand-year monarchy, the centuries of Habsburg rule, the semifederal and aristocratic society—lay in ruins together with the buildings and had been lost like the dead. Certainly many realized that Hungary was standing on the threshold

of tremendous changes, changes so great as to be properly compared only with a handful of major turning points in Hungarian history. To appreciate the changes to come, however, one must know a little bit about the “Old Hungary.”

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Chapter “Old Hungary” and the Lutheran Church

One For Hungarians, the period in history which lies between the two world wars is known as the Horthy era. It takes its name from Miklós Horthy, who had distinguished himself as an admiral in the Austro-Hungarian navy during World War I. Indeed it was Horthy’s prestige as a war hero, rather than any sort of political acumen, that secured for him the position of Hungary’s head of state. Horthy’s official title was regent. Historically the regent had exercised the powers of the king in the king’s absence until his return. Thus, Horthy was regent for the king—only Hungary had no king. Neither did Austria for that matter; it had become a republic in 1918. The Habsburg monarchy, which had ruled in Austria and Hungary for centuries, no longer existed. Horthy’s title was an attempt to express continuity with Hungary’s thousand-year monarchy, and Hungary in the Horthy period was technically a monarchy. It was a monarchy without a king, governed by a temporary regent whose position was permanent.

Sometimes Horthy and the political system over which he presided have been portrayed as fascist. That portrayal is inaccurate.² Horthy, who had spent a good portion of his life in the court of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph, had the predilections of a constitutional monarch. Given the peculiarities of interwar Hungary, however, those predilections could manifest themselves in strange ways. Rather than fascist, the Horthy regime should be understood as oddly authoritarian.

Horthy assumed the post of regent after a period of extended political instability in Hungary. At the end of World War I, as the Austro-Hungarian monarchy crumbled, Hungarians were left to search for a new form of government. In March 1919, after a desperate attempt to introduce liberal democracy in Hungary had failed, a communist named Béla Kun seized power. Kun had close ties with the Soviet Union, and he managed to establish the first communist dictatorship in Europe outside Russia. The Republic of Councils, as it was called, both embarked on hopeless military campaigns and employed brutal force at home against the Hungarians. After 131 days, it collapsed and was replaced by Horthy’s regency. This brief experience of communist rule was so traumatic for Hungarians that in the Horthy era almost every proposal for social reform was viewed with suspicion and conflated with communism. The Horthy regime was fiercely anti-communist, antiliberal, and antireform. Thus, rather than implementing much-needed policies of modernization, Horthy and his supporters clung

stubbornly to their vision of “Old Hungary”—a semifeudal, authoritarian, neo-baroque society.

Hungary’s historical churches, however, flourished in the Horthy period. Horthy turned to the churches for legitimation, and, responding, the churches filled a role in Hungary’s political and civil spheres more significant than that of the preceding era.³ Their importance was reflected in part by the regime’s self-description as *Christian* and *national*, two words intended to designate the governing ideals of Hungarian society. What these words meant precisely was not altogether clear. They meant different things at different times, but basically, they idealized a conservative social and political order. *Christian* designated the responsibility of the ruling classes before God but also connoted the special social and political privileges that usually accompany such responsibility. *National* evoked the authority of distinctive Hungarian traditions but did not necessarily distinguish between the bad and the good, the archaic and the living. *Christian-national* could, on more ugly occasions, be contrasted with *Jewish-foreign*. This was especially so when defining the Horthy regime’s fierce opposition to communism. In Hungary as in many places, communism was portrayed occasionally as some kind of Jewish conspiracy.

Many churches in Horthy’s Hungary enjoyed social and political privileges that might be characterized with the term *establishment*. Legally established (in Hungarian, *bevett* or “accepted”) churches received substantial state subsidy. Their highest officeholders (for example, bishops) held seats in the upper house of parliament, and middle-level church representatives often held important positions in local government.⁴ Membership in established churches was recognized by the state and determined at birth, so that a child legally belonged to the religious denomination of his or her parents and was required to attend religious education class in school. Adult church members were required to pay a church tax, levied by the churches and, if necessary, collected by the state.

Most, but not all, of Hungary’s churches were legally “accepted.” These were the Roman Catholic Church (constituting 65 percent of the population) and the Greek-Catholic Church (2 percent of the population), the Reformed Church (21 percent of the population), the Lutheran Church (6 percent of the population), the Orthodox Church (.5 percent of the population), the Unitarian Church (.1 percent of the population), and until 1941 the Israelite Denomination (the legal name for the Jewish religious community—5 percent of the population).⁵ The Lutheran Church, although significantly smaller than the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches, was the third largest church in Hungary and possessed a proud and distinguished heritage.

A particularly important dimension of church life in the Horthy period was parochial education. In the interwar years, somewhere between

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60 to 70 percent of schools were operated by the churches. Furthermore, 75 to 80 percent of teacher-training institutions were operated by the churches, which meant that the overwhelming percentage of Hungarian teachers were trained in religious institutions.⁶ Parochial schools had been an integral part of Hungarian Protestantism since the beginning days of the Reformation. Virtually every village parish had an elementary school, while parochial high schools were located in cities. Many of the church schools were highly distinguished. The prestigious Lutheran Fásor Gymnasium, for example, educated a number of future Nobel Prize winners.

In the Lutheran Church during the Horthy period, religious life stretched out along two identifiable currents. One might be called “evangelist” or “pietist,” the other “churchly” or, perhaps, “confessional.” The evangelization wing was centered in the northwestern Hungarian town of Győr, where the greatest Lutheran evangelists originated or worked. The churchly trend was strongest in Budapest—perhaps because Budapest was where the general church was seated, and in Budapest the institutional characteristics of the church were most prominent.

The Hungarian connection with pietism was wide and deep, extending back to pietism’s beginnings in the seventeenth century.⁷ One striking expression of the way that pietism had taken hold in Hungary by the Horthy period were well-institutionalized “home mission” programs. Frequently home mission was carried out by means of “evangelization weeks.” For Americans, these “evangelization weeks” should perhaps be understood as revivals, although as revivals they had distinctive features. First, they were evangelizations within already established congregations. Since everyone in Hungary belonged by law to a particular denomination, and since conversion from one denomination to another was a legally cumbersome endeavor, home mission meant mission to those who were already Christian and, indeed, to those who already belonged to one’s own denomination. Thus, the purpose of evangelization weeks was not to win new converts but to deepen the faith of those who were already, at least nominally, Christian—or more precisely in this case, Lutheran. A second distinctive feature of these Hungarian evangelizations was the way they were sponsored by the ecclesiastical church. Dioceses had their own “mission pastors” who were commissioned to travel through the country and, collaborating with parish pastors, would visit congregations to hold evangelization weeks.

Evangelization weeks, however, were only part of a much broader evangelical or pietist movement that shaped Hungarian Protestantism in the early twentieth century. By the time of Horthy’s regency, evangelical movements had produced hosts of voluntary associations dedicated both to deepening the faith and to social work. There was, for example, a Protestant hospital and a National Protestant Orphans Association. Another notable

association was the Phoebe Lutheran Diaconess Association, a women's monastic order, which at its peak had more than one hundred members. Members took vows of poverty and chastity, and dedicated themselves to various kinds of charity work. Numerous student associations were founded as well. A Hungarian branch of the YMCA was established in 1883. Soon there were similar, native Hungarian student organizations, such as the Hungarian Evangelical Christian Student Federation and the National Hungarian Protestant Student Federation.⁸

All of these organizations—and the list is hardly exhaustive—had a genuine ecumenical character about them. Indeed the student organizations were explicitly ecumenical in their mission. Even diaconical institutions like the Phoebe association were denominationally flexible and focused on the inner life of faith rather than confessional differences. Moreover, these institutions enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy from the institutional church. For the most part they were not subordinated to, and in fact they often had no official connection with, the ecclesiastical churches.

Alongside and sometimes intertwined with evangelical life in the Lutheran Church was the churchly trend. It expressed itself partly through renewed interest in Luther and the Lutheran tradition. Various organizations, such as the Luther Association and the National Luther Federation, committed themselves to strengthening Lutheran identity. Efforts were made to translate the works of Luther into Hungarian. Interestingly, however, this churchly trend does not appear to have existed in tension with the evangelical movement. Hungarian Lutherans in the Horthy period were interested in their confessional identity, and many were loyal to their churches, but there does not appear to have been a Lutheran confessional movement self-consciously delineating itself in opposition to other theological movements or trends. Certainly the confessional movement did not exist in opposition to the evangelization movement. Sometimes, even, a Hungarian pietist was also a passionate “churchman.”

In 1945 the Lutheran Church in Hungary was comprised of four dioceses, called the Dunántúl, the Dunáninnen, the Tisza, and the Bányá. Each diocese had its own bishop as well as a nonclerical “inspector.” The place of nonclerical officeholders in the Lutheran Church in Hungary is one of the distinctive features of its polity. Authority and administration in the church rests in the hands not only of ordained clergy but also of non-ordained “inspectors,” who are elected from the congregations. Historically these inspectors were members of the nobility, and their purpose was to protect the church from government persecution. As a consequence, in 1945 the highest authority in the Lutheran Church rested not in a bishop but in the secular office of General Inspector of Church and School. Second to the general inspector in authority was the senior ranking bishop, the bishop who had

held office longest. In 1945 the General Inspector of the Church and School was Baron Albert Radvánsky. The senior bishop was Béla Kapi of Dunántúl. Zoltán Túróczy was bishop of the Tisza diocese, and in the Bánya diocese was Lajos Ordass. These last two bishops are of particular importance to the history that follows.

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Zoltán Túróczy was born in 1893 in Árnót, a town located in the northern part of present-day Hungary. His father was a pastor, and his grandfather had been bishop. Growing up, the young Túróczy attended the Lutheran parochial schools near his birthplace, then traveled to the Lutheran seminary in Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia) and was ordained in 1915. He was a pious man with a rigorist disposition and a strong affinity for evangelism. Once he traveled to Finland, where he was affected by his encounter with Finnish revivalism. As a young man he belonged to the Hungarian Evangelical Christian Student Association, an evangelically and ecumenically minded organization. Not long after his ordination, Túróczy was given a pastorate in the city of Győr, a location congenial to him because it was a thriving center for Lutheran evangelism. Over time a special relationship developed between the man and the city. Pastor Túróczy distinguished himself as a preacher. In fact many considered him the greatest preacher of his generation. Túróczy rose to prominence. Indeed, few men in the Lutheran Church in Hungary have been more revered and loved than Zoltán Túróczy. In 1939 he was elected bishop.⁹

Lajos Ordass was born in 1901 in the village of Torzsa, which lay in the southern part of the Hungarian Kingdom that was transferred to Yugoslavia at the end of the First World War.¹⁰ Ordass is an archaic Hungarian word for wolf, and Wolf was the name of his parents, who were ethnic Germans. When the Nazis occupied Hungary in 1944 Lajos changed his name to Ordass, but when he was a child he had spoken German at home. In Torzsa, Ordass's father worked as teacher and organist for the Lutheran congregation. As befits the son of a schoolmaster, young Lajos was a diligent student—so much so that at the age of eleven he was offered a scholarship to attend a gymnasium in Hermannstadt, which was a “Saxon” city in Transylvania (today it is called Sibiu and can be found in Romania; its Hungarian name is Nagyszeben). Centuries earlier, ethnic Germans had migrated from Saxony to Transylvania, where they established prosperous cities. The Transylvanian Saxons were unique, fiercely independent, and protective of their cultural identity. When Ordass's father learned of the offer from Hermannstadt, he told his son, “Ich lass' aus dir keinen Pangerman machen, mein Kind—I will not have them make a pan-German out of you, my child,” and that was the end of it.¹¹ Ordass went instead to a church school in central Hungary. When World War I ended and Torzsa and the surrounding area became Yugoslavian, Ordass was still studying in

Hungary. He could not return home, nor were letters or packages permitted across the border. For the next five years Ordass had no contact with his family. Alone in Hungary, one kind of war's many orphans, he found a second home and a foster parent in the church. In 1920 Ordass went to Budapest to study at seminary, and in 1924 he was ordained.

Unlike Bishop Túróczy, Ordass was not a prominent personality in the church when he became bishop. In fact he had attracted broad public notice only a short time before his election. Ordass worked as a pastor in Budapest during the Second World War, which placed him near the church's central administration and gave him greater exposure to the issues then confronting the church leadership. One of these was the so-called German question. Within the Lutheran Church in Hungary, some ethnic Germans were clamoring for the creation of an independent German diocese, which in turn would have close connections with the Volksbund, a pan-German cultural organization that connected Germans throughout Europe to the Third Reich. The Hungarian German Lutherans made their demands public by publishing a "Memorandum on the Solution of Burning Questions for the German Congregations." The church leadership preferred to avoid the issue and delay any decision, knowing that the outcome of the war would effect a solution. This approach dissatisfied Pastor Ordass—still known then as Pastor Wolf—who wanted direct confrontation with the pan-Germans, believing this would expose them as having little popular support. On his own initiative, therefore, Ordass wrote a lengthy refutation of the demands set out in the "Memorandum" and, out of his own pocket, had it published and distributed in the church.¹²

Through this and other bold demonstrations of his anti-German convictions, Ordass began to attract attention in the church. Consequently when the sick and elderly Bishop Sándor Raffay announced his retirement at war's end, there may have been a shared perception that Lajos Ordass was particularly suited to represent Hungary's Lutheran Church abroad and before Western ecumenical leaders. Credible representation would be important for a church in a small, defeated country that had been allied with Hitler. Moreover, Ordass knew some seven foreign languages and had close contacts in the Scandinavian churches.¹³ In September 1945 he was installed as bishop of the Bányá diocese, which was seated in Budapest.

In crucial respects Bishop Túróczy and Bishop Ordass represented the two currents, evangelical and churchly, that comprised Hungarian Lutheran church life. Túróczy was a great evangelizer, shaped by years of experience in the evangelizing city of Győr. Ordass was from Budapest and a man of the church in a near-literal sense—the church had reared him when he was separated from his family. Photographs of Bishop Túróczy show a balding, elderly man with round steel-rimmed glasses and a thin,

tight little mustache. He is Túróczy the well-established evangelizer, who may or may not understand the self-righteousness which is the temptation of every great preacher and pietist. Photographs of Bishop Ordass show a face, stern and drawn, with Germanic discipline and the clear, purposeful eyes of a man of conviction. In fact, Ordass is unique among persons in this history in that even his pictures are striking. He must have been charismatic, hinting at, perhaps, a kind of greatness. Only among the early generation of reformers in Hungary can one find a figure who stamped his church as much as Ordass was to.

The Rise of Dictatorship: The Lutheran Church Confronts Salami Tactics

Although the Soviets occupied Hungary in 1945, they did not immediately introduce themselves as totalitarian dictators. Dictatorship appeared unambiguously only in 1947—known to Hungarian historians as the “year of the turn.” In that year Hungary turned from “bourgeoisie democracy” to “people’s democracy.” The turn itself, of course, was not too democratic. It was the achievement of what Hungary’s Stalinist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi, called “salami tactics.” Salami tactics expressed the principle of “divide and conquer” in the colorful imagery of Rákosi’s imagination. The communists sliced up their enemies like pieces of salami and disposed of them.

In the first years after the war, however, the course on which Hungary was set was yet contested, and political leaders and public personages were vying to define it. From early on there were battles to be fought, even for Hungary’s little Lutheran Church. In May 1945, Bishop Túróczy was arrested and tried before a so-called “people’s court.” Such trials were a common feature of postwar Hungarian life. The provisional government had erected special people’s courts to prosecute individuals guilty of nefarious political activity in the Horthy period. Putatively, the people’s courts worked to weed out undesirable elements from public life, such as war criminals and fascists; in truth, they were little more than a tool for the realization of political interests, particularly those of the communists. Between 1945 and 1950 close to 60,000 people were tried by these special courts, 27,000 convicted, and 189 sentenced to death.¹⁴

Why Bishop Túróczy caught the attention of the people’s court in Nyíregyháza, the seat of his diocese, is not known. He probably had conservative political dispositions, although he was not a figure prominent for his political views. In the past he had expressed anticommunist and anti-Soviet sentiments, and, although this was no special distinction in Horthy’s time, perhaps it was why he was convicted by a people’s court on charges of inciting to war against the Soviet Union and subsequently sentenced to ten years in prison.¹⁵

The Lutheran Church was stunned by Túróczy's conviction; the church leadership petitioned to have it overturned. Their efforts met with little success, however, and in failure they encountered a quandary. The government approached Túróczy early in his imprisonment to present him with an option: he could resign and be freed immediately, or he could stay in prison and stay a bishop. This was a difficult choice: ten years is a long time; the church certainly knew of men capable of succeeding Túróczy; and, moreover, Túróczy was in poor health. On the other hand, could a leader of the church resign under duress? Túróczy was uncertain and sent word to the bishops, who took up the matter at a meeting on October 29, 1945. Béla Kapi, the senior ranking bishop, reasoned that in light of his poor health and the long prison sentence, Túróczy should resign. Everyone agreed except Bishop Ordass, who, speaking to the matter last, argued that if Túróczy resigned he would implicitly admit the truth of the charges against him. "God might have need, in the interests of the church, for Túróczy to die in prison," Ordass argued; "Do we have the freedom to advise him to ask to be released when the price is his resignation?"¹⁶ The impact of Ordass's words was so great that the bishops reversed themselves. They sent a message to Túróczy advising against resignation, although they placed the final decision in Túróczy's hands.¹⁷

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Túróczy did not resign, and, as it happened, he did not have to spend ten years in prison either. Through its intercessions with the government, the church leadership obtained his release in February 1946. However, Ordass's stern stance at the 1945 bishops conference later extended into the common consciousness of the Lutheran Church, helping to define a fundamental moral argument about how the church should respond to dictatorship. That moral argument sharpened considerably in the "year of the turn."

In 1948 the Lutheran Church elected a new bishop, József Szabó. Szabó was another figure steeped in the tradition of Hungarian evangelism. He had served for a while as an assistant pastor in Győr, where he came into contact and worked with Zoltán Túróczy and where the two men became friends. Szabó's installation ceremony took place on March 18, 1948. Besides church members, a representative of the government named Ernő Mihályfi also attended. In an unplanned event, Mihályfi delivered a speech in which he accused the church of harboring "political reaction," a blanket charge used by the communists to eliminate their enemies. In the events leading up to the turn, the communists diligently ferreted out of public life all "reactionaries," thereby ensuring Hungary's move to "people's democracy." Thus Mihályfi's speech was a rude political attack that marked the beginning of the government's assault on the Lutheran Church.¹⁸

The day after Szabó's installation, the bishops were visited by a man named Iván Reök, who introduced himself as a "semi-official emissary" from the government to the church.¹⁹ Iván Reök was a surgeon by profession but also a member of the Lutheran Church and, most importantly, a deeply committed Christian. Reök had experienced personal conversion through his encounter with Hungary's evangelization movement, and he had devoted a good portion of his life to converting or deepening the faith of others. An educated man, Reök was especially committed to spreading the Gospel among intellectuals, and he took part actively in the weekly "intellectual evangelizations" at the Lutheran church at Budapest's Deák tér (Deák Square). His participation in the evangelization movement brought him into contact with some of its leading figures, men such as Zoltán Túróczy. In fact, Reök and Túróczy knew each other well enough that, with a few other leading "evangelists," they compiled a book of their lectures and devotions directed toward the evangelization of intellectuals and published it in the early 1940s. After the war, Reök became active in politics. He joined a political party and even became a representative in Parliament. His political involvement brought him into contact with the communist party's general secretary, Mátyás Rákosi, with whom Reök boasted of having a good relationship. Thus, it was as Rákosi's "friend," as a parliamentary representative, and as an active church member that Reök took upon himself the self-designated assignment of mediating between the government and the Lutheran Church.²⁰

Reök first visited Bishop Ordass and urged that the bishops issue a public statement expressing the church's goodwill toward the state and a willingness to enter into church-state negotiations. In fact, Reök had already troubled to prepare such a statement, which he pulled out of his pocket and showed to the bishop. Ordass refused, saying the statement was excessive in confessing the church's past sins and obsequious in its praise of Hungary's current political leadership. Not to be rebuffed, Reök went to Béla Kapi, the senior ranking bishop, whom he did persuade, and a statement was issued—although not the one drafted by Reök. Kapi's statement was signed by all four bishops and distributed in the form of a circular letter.

This statement, issued immediately after Mihályfi's attack, represented the bishops' attempt to position the church vis-à-vis a government that had clearly become antagonistic. The bishops started with a mild confession of the church's past sins, acknowledged the legitimacy of the newly formed Hungarian Republic, and expressed a desire to enter into church-state negotiations. Significantly, however, the bishops also established conditions for arranging the church's relationship with the state. The church needed to be free to conduct its full ministry, which consisted of the clear preaching of the Gospel, the unimpeded administration of the sacraments, the baptism

of children, the unhindered conduct of social and charity work, and, most importantly in light of later developments, the education of children in the church's schools.²¹

After the statement was issued, contact between Lutheran leaders and high-level government officials grew frequent in preparation for the negotiations that the government had requested. As would become clear, the government's purpose in these negotiations was to secure the church's consent to the nationalization of its schools. In order to do this, the communists needed first to divide the church leadership.

On April 21, 1948, at a meeting of the church's presidium, Bishop Kapi announced his intention to retire and immediately relinquished his position as senior ranking bishop. Under normal conditions, Bishop Túróczy would have succeeded Kapi, but Túróczy was still under conviction of the people's court. In 1946 he had been released from prison, and in February 1948 he received permission to exercise his bishop's office under certain restrictions. Túróczy, therefore, could not exercise the duties of senior bishop, and those duties were assigned to Bishop Ordass, who would also head up the negotiations with the state. After the presidium adjourned, Ordass was called to an informal discussion taking place between Iván Reök and bishops Túróczy and Szabó. Reök was pressing the church to issue another statement and calling attention to the bloody costs of resisting the state. Having convinced Túróczy and Szabó, Reök was anxious to persuade Ordass. But Ordass, with the authority of senior bishop, rebuffed Reök, and no statement was issued.²²

The next day Iván Reök and Bishop Túróczy visited Mátyás Rákosi, reportedly to discuss the matter of Túróczy's amnesty. At the meeting Rákosi said he wanted Ordass removed from the church-state negotiations. Afterward, Túróczy met with Ordass. Relating Rákosi's demands, Túróczy suggested Ordass remove himself from the church delegation. Ordass responded emphatically, saying the government could not dictate which persons would represent the church.²³

A month later, on May 21, negotiations between the Lutheran Church and the government got underway. The minister of culture, Gyula Ortutay, opened the meeting, expressing his hope that the two sides would come to an agreement quickly in light of the preliminary discussions with church representatives that had already taken place. Ordass asked what Ortutay meant by preliminary discussions. Ortutay said he was referring to discussions held the previous day among Bishop Túróczy, Bishop Szabó, Iván Reök, Ernő Mihályfi, and Rákosi. Ortutay then read out a proposed text for the church-state agreement in which the church agreed to the nationalization of its schools. Ordass defended the church's right to its schools, generating a storm. Members of the government delegation accused Ordass of

representing “clerical reaction,” and the first round of negotiations ended in upheaval.²⁴

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A few days later the church leadership met informally with Mihályfi to discuss the proposed agreement. Things were progressing as before when suddenly Mihályfi announced that the church leadership was divided. At a meeting with Rákosi on May 20, Mihályfi said, Túróczy and Szabó had stated their willingness to accept school nationalization and had found the proposed agreement acceptable. Ordass was thrown off guard. Túróczy and Szabó did not deny Mihályfi’s assertions. The meeting ended. The church delegation left. Walking back to the church office, Túróczy, turning to Ordass apologetically, said, “One’s relationship to these people is like that to highway robbers. They force a man to undress and he needs to beg them to at least leave him his underwear!” Ordass answered, “You know Zoltán that there’s no need to beg for underwear! Let everyone see openly that we’ve been dealing with highway robbers!”²⁵

In a clean execution of the divide and conquer principle behind Rákosi’s salami tactics, the church leadership was split. Unfortunately, little is known about the two meetings that took place between Túróczy, Reök, and Rákosi on April 22 and May 20. No known records for those meetings exist. However, the fact that Reök was present at them raises uncomfortable questions about Reök’s influence on Túróczy.

Bishop Ordass, clear about the division in the leadership and about the state’s intentions, modified his negotiating strategy. In the next round of negotiations on May 27, the church leadership put forth the following position: the bishops were not authorized to make binding legal agreements, and certainly they were not empowered to relinquish the church schools. Such changes could only be approved by a general church synod, the highest legislative organ in the Lutheran Church in Hungary, comprised of representatives from the church’s congregations. The church delegation asked for a written text of the proposed church-state agreement so that its responsible ecclesiastical organs could discuss the agreement concretely.²⁶

Over the next few weeks the government’s position became clear. Parliament was going to nationalize the church schools regardless of what the church did. Either the church could consent to this nationalization through a church-state agreement and in so doing obtain certain concessions from the state, most notably the continuation of state financial support, or the church could refuse to sign the agreement, lose the schools anyway, and also lose the concessions the government was presently willing to make.

The prospect of school nationalization created a crisis in the Lutheran Church, driving people behind either the “Túróczy line” or the “Ordass

line.” The “Túróczy line” argued that the church should relinquish its schools. To resist school nationalization would be to disobey the decrees of a legitimate government, and, more importantly, it would be costly and hopeless. The church only had the right, and duty, to oppose the state if the state intervened into the church’s essential ministry. Parochial schools, however, did not belong to the church’s essential ministry, and, therefore, the church had to give them up if the state asked for them.

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The Túróczy position broke abruptly from the position of the church as defined in the earlier bishops’ statement in March. True, Túróczy was not alone among the leadership. Bishop Szabó also supported relinquishing the schools. Curiously, however, the primary theoretical architect of the Túróczy line was not Túróczy himself, nor Bishop Szabó, but their mutual friend, the pastor Imre Veöreös.

Imre Veöreös was from Győr. He was born in Győr and later, although Lutheran, he went to high school at the Benedictine school in Győr. In 1937 Veöreös was ordained, and sometime after that he began working in the office of Bishop Béla Kapi, whose diocese was seated in Győr. In Győr Veöreös got to know both Túróczy and Szabó, and considered them his friends. As a pastor for the bishop in Győr, Veöreös prepared evangelization programs for the diocese and also traveled through the diocese to preach at evangelization weeks; that is, Veöreös was a mission pastor and evangelizer. However, Veöreös the evangelizer was also an intellectual. He had a thin, usually expressionless face and an unflinching look, which conveyed both a sense of self and a reserve of intelligence. Imre Veöreös was smart, and knowing he was smart, he was strong willed and independently minded, too.²⁷ In 1948 Veöreös published a series of articles in which he mounted commanding arguments in favor of relinquishing the church schools, thereby giving theological integrity to the Túróczy position.

The reasoning behind the “Ordass line” was somewhat more difficult to discern. On the one hand, because the church had previously asserted an integral connection between parochial education and its ministry, Ordass was only affirming the church’s traditional position. He believed the church possessed the right to maintain schools and should not give up that right voluntarily. On the other hand, even if one granted that the church possessed this right, that alone provided little guidance for responding to the concrete threat facing the church in 1948. The state was going to nationalize the schools anyway. It had issued an ultimatum to the church: either go along with us and obtain a few concessions, or go against us and lose everything. This was not much of a choice. If the church leadership accepted its terms, then why would they refuse an agreement? Yet, apparently, Ordass did accept these terms, and he was unwilling, nevertheless, to consent to school nationalization.

To understand this, one needs a sense of how the schools were incorporated into the structure of the church. The church schools were maintained and operated mostly by individual congregations. In fact, schools constituted an integral part of the life of most parishes. Several generations of families might attend and maintain the same school. Thus, in one sense the schools belonged to the general church, in another sense they belonged to the congregations. Probably Ordass reasoned that the school question would be decided locally, and, as a bishop, he believed his duty was to support the local congregations, especially if those congregations wanted to fight for their schools. The bishops, Ordass may have reasoned, should not give up the schools over the heads of the congregations.

Secondarily, Ordass may have thought that if the Lutheran congregations stood by their schools doggedly, then the state, forced to take note of this, would be unable to seize all of them. The Lutheran Church, after all, was not the only church with parochial schools. The leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary, Cardinal József Mindszenty, was at this time organizing stiff opposition to school nationalization.²⁸ If Mindszenty managed to force the state to back away from nationalizing Catholic schools, Ordass may have thought, then perhaps some Lutheran schools could also be saved. However, these sorts of considerations were only secondary in Ordass's thinking. He clearly reckoned with the possibility that his stance could lead to the loss of the schools, even the loss of state subsidy, and perhaps worse. Thus Ordass's position seemed grounded finally only in the conviction that nationalizing the schools was a wrong against the church with which he was unwilling to cooperate.

As the date set for nationalization, June 16, drew near, forces within the government increased pressure on the church. On June 12, Iván Reök convened an assembly of the National Luther Alliance, of which he was president. Reök arrived at the meeting in the company of a few men from the government and said, "I will have anyone who opposes me arrested!" Then Reök read a statement in which the National Luther Alliance expressed its support for the government and its approval of nationalizing the schools. Reök announced that the assembly had approved the statement, and then he adjourned the meeting.²⁹

On June 14, two days before the vote in Parliament, the Lutheran Church had scheduled a meeting of its presbytery and the general assembly. Early that morning the government announced that Túróczy had received amnesty. The amnesty removed the obstacles which prevented Túróczy from holding the position of senior bishop. Thus, when the general assembly met later that day, it transferred the powers of senior bishop from Ordass to Túróczy. Simultaneously, it passed a resolution expressing the desire that, if at all possible, the church should keep its schools. Meanwhile, the Association of Hungarian Lutheran Pastors also passed a resolution that

day urging the church leadership not to consent to the nationalization of the schools.

The minutes from this pastors' meeting also attest to Ordass's remarkable adherence to principle. The transfer of the senior bishop's post from Ordass to Túróczy meant that Túróczy would head the church delegation in its negotiations with the state. Everyone knew this, and everyone knew, also, that Túróczy's position was fundamentally different from Ordass's. With this in the background, a pastor named András Keken submitted a proposal to the pastors association urging that Ordass remain as senior bishop. Ordass certainly understood that should Túróczy replace him in the church-state negotiations, it would seriously, if not decisively, undermine Ordass's own position. Considering the stakes, Ordass might have attempted to prevent Túróczy from returning to the church presidency. However, Ordass also knew that, in light of Túróczy's amnesty, this would be a deviation from church law. The minutes of the June 14 pastors meeting report that "András Keken's proposal was withdrawn at the request of D. Bishop Ordass."³⁰

Protests notwithstanding, Hungary's Parliament nationalized the country's parochial schools on June 16, 1948.

Disposing of Bishop Ordass

After the nationalization of church schools, no large-scale struggle ensued in the Lutheran Church. Ordass never tried to organize political opposition. The state began the process of taking over the schools, but it also wanted the church to sanction the nationalization of its schools by approving the proposed church-state agreement. Since only a synod had the authority to approve such an agreement, the government wanted to eliminate any church leaders (potential synod members) who were unwilling to cooperate. On August 24 the police arrested General Inspector Albert Radványky and another churchman, Sándor Vargha. The next day they arrested Bishop Ordass.

Bishop Ordass, however, had become internationally known. Between February and July 1947 he had traveled abroad extensively, in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and even the United States, representing his church. During those travels Ordass had met and forged friendships with many leading figures in world Lutheranism. Ordass also attended the constituting assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund, Sweden, where he was elected LWF vice president. Later, at the constituting session of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, Ordass was elected to the body's Central Committee.³¹ Thus, Bishop Ordass's arrest attracted attention and elicited protest from international church bodies, and within a day he was released. Radványky and Vargha were not released, however, and in prison they both resigned their church offices.³²

The Hungarian government, aware now of Ordass's international stature, moved against him more cautiously. On August 30 the government delivered an ultimatum to the church's central office demanding that Bishop Ordass resign by September 8. If he refused, he would be arrested for misappropriating foreign donations to the Lutheran Church in Hungary. The punishment for such a crime varied from a few years' imprisonment to death. At the same time, the government promised to release Radványky and Vargha in exchange for Ordass's resignation.

Once again Ordass was forced to consider the resignation of a bishop under duress, this time his own. His position was the same as it had been in Túróczy's case. Ordass believed that to resign would be to flee from the responsibilities of the bishop's office, which had been entrusted to him by the church. To flee in the face of personal danger would be a betrayal of his office. Ordass's sense of duty overrode considerations of personal risk, and he refused to resign.³³

He was arrested on the evening of September 8 and charged with failing to register financial donations to his church with the Hungarian National Bank. On October 1 he was sentenced to two years in prison. In the meantime, the church's inspectors, compelled by threats, began resigning. By the end of September most of the higher offices in the Lutheran Church were empty. Túróczy and Szabó were leading the church alone. By December the atmosphere was right for convoking a synod. The synod met for a day and empowered Bishop Túróczy to sign the church-state agreement, which he did on December 14, 1948. It would remain legally in effect until 1989.

If one disregarded the section treating the nationalized schools, "the agreement," as it was called, actually looked good on paper. It guaranteed the church freedom of religious practice, defining that broadly to include worship, bible study, evangelization, charity work, and autonomous church administration. For a time it guaranteed the church a state subsidy, prescribing that this financial assistance be eliminated only gradually over the next twenty years. Particularly generous, given the circumstances, was a provision allowing the church to retain two of its Budapest high schools (gymnasias). Also exempted from nationalization were all educational institutions with an exclusively ecclesial function, that is, the church's one seminary. The agreement even provided for the continuation of obligatory religious education in the public schools. In return, the church recognized the legitimacy of the state and promised to intercede for it with prayer, to commemorate state holidays, and to endeavor to raise conscientious citizens. Thus, on paper the agreement provided for the gradual separation of church and state and guaranteed the church's institutional freedom, even while doing away with the parochial schools. In practice, however, the state violated virtually every provision in the agreement over the years.

The communists had executed their intentions easily. The nationaliza-

tion of the schools, the signing of the agreement, and the removal of Bishop Ordass had posed no serious difficulties. However, the power of Ordass's personal witness would haunt the Lutheran Church in Hungary throughout the entire communist period. The moral disagreement embodied in the conflict between Ordass and Túróczy would remain unresolved. Meaningfully, the climax to that conflict took place while Ordass was in prison. In January 1949, Túróczy visited Ordass in prison and asked him to resign his bishopric. The encounter, described by Ordass, was dramatic:

25
*Dealing
with
Dictators*

On January 8, 1949, Zoltán Túróczy came to me in Szeged's Csillag prison with a ready proposal. . . . The government was pressuring the church to have my case reviewed by a church court. He—Túróczy—had told the people in the government that there was no court in the Lutheran Church in Hungary which would deliver a guilty verdict in the case. Then Zoltán Túróczy told me that he had brought up the possibility with Rákosi of having me and my family travel abroad—as had come up once before, prior to the trial. Rákosi now firmly ruled this solution out. However, the government was willing to offer the following: They would release me from prison immediately upon my resignation of the Bányá diocesan bishop's office. They would even guarantee a state pension so that I wouldn't have to worry about supporting my family. I needed to pass away the time in quiet isolation for a short while, and then, if there were no new confrontations between myself and the government, I could take up pastoral work in some congregation.

After informing me of this, Túróczy went through the arguments by which he hoped to persuade me to accept this as a solution. He told me that the situation in the Lutheran Church today was altogether different from when I had seen him last. My wife, whom he had visited in the hospital, had also expressed the opinion that she could count on the fingers of one hand those pastors who were loyally standing by my case. . . .

After listening to Zoltán Túróczy, I expressed myself briefly. I had asked for a review of my case. I needed justice, not amnesty. I was sorry that he had raised the possibility of my going abroad without my having asked for it, because I could only imagine going abroad once I had received justice. As for resigning my bishop's office, my position was unalterably the same as it was in the past. I cannot be removed from my bishop's office at the government's insistence, because it was not the government which placed me into that office. If I should become convinced that I had lost the confidence of the diocese's congregations, at that moment, without hesitation, I would step down. But I have no way to be convinced of this, because, although today I have heard that the pastors have left me, I have also heard that no court in the Lutheran

Church today would render a guilty verdict against me. Therefore, I cannot determine how I actually stand in the matter of confidence.

Zoltán Túróczy's answer was very sharp. I can't quote him word for word, of course. But the essence of what he said was as follows: I was assessing the situation only from my selfish viewpoint. I was not hearing the loud, compelling words about the church's need to live. I was led only by the ambition to place a halo around my head (This final expression I quote word for word!) That is why I am left coldly unmoved by the fact that the Lutheran Church in Hungary will be slandered more now than ever in its history.

After this Zoltán Túróczy spoke with the warden, and after that he proposed to me that they go out to lunch. . . . He asked that in that time I consider everything we had discussed and then give him a final answer. The warden permitted Zoltán Túróczy to give me a Bible.

I was placed in a special cell for the hour and a half deliberation time. I did not pass this time in agitation, nor in spite. I read the Bible and prayed. . . . I read the thirteenth chapter of Romans, which had been quoted so often recently, and I read the famous words written in the fifth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, "We must obey God, rather than men." Then I consciously searched through the New Testament for places where some disciple of Christ was in a situation similar to mine. In this way I came to the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. This chapter relates the history of Paul and Silas' unjust imprisonment. I had the feeling that the end of this history was a biblical message speaking directly to me; "And when it was day, the magistrates sent the bailiffs, saying: Let those people go. And the prison keeper reported these words to Paul: the magistrates have sent me here that I may let you go. Now therefore departing, go in peace! And Paul said: They have beaten us openly, without sentence, although we are Roman people, and have thrown us into prison. And now they want to send us out in hiding? No indeed! Let them come themselves and take us out!"

When Túróczy . . . returned I informed [him] of my decision with a few words: I'm staying here in prison!

I added only that I considered Túróczy's words about the halo around my head to be unjust, unbrotherly and uncharitable. Túróczy didn't withdraw the statement. He didn't even soften it. And so, with a fair amount of tension, our visit ended.³⁴

Underneath this exchange was a profound moral disagreement about how to respond to dictatorship. Playing out that disagreement would take forty-five years.