

A Hungarian Musician's Memoir of Suffering, Survival, and Fate

Így végződött

Jeffrey Charles Wagner

Abstract: Finding an aging manuscript written by a beloved teacher and musician, George Bánhalmi (1926–1935), led the author to investigate Bánhalmi's detainment, as a Jew, in forced labor in Hungary during World War II, which was the focus of the manuscript. The author's narrative in this article touches also on some of Bánhalmi's accomplishments in life after surviving his time of forced labor: graduating with honors from Budapest's famed Franz Liszt Academy; winning a top prize in the piano category in the 1956 Queen Elisabeth [of Belgium] Competition; concertizing in Eastern Europe and the United States; composing numerous musical works; and, and after settling in the United States in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, teaching several generations of young people, including the author. jeffwagner@aol.com

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Biography: Jeffrey Wagner holds an MA in Piano Performance from Indiana University and a BA in Music from Northwestern University. He was for many years a consulting editor for *Clavier Magazine*, for which he wrote a "Personal Perspective" column and conducted interviews with well-known performers and teachers in the field of classical music. He was twice honored for excellence in music journalism by the Educational Press Association of America. In recent years he has worked to record and perform music by two composers whose lives were interrupted by the Holocaust, Walter Bricht and George Bánhalmi.

From a pile of papers and photos, a small worn notebook dropped into my hands—a booklet from a different time, whose title page read *Így végződött*. I opened it gingerly, as it was aged, and carefully leafed through a few of its pages, which were numbered 1 to 115. It was typewritten in Hungarian, a language to me both incomprehensible and exotic. I saw the signature of the beloved piano teacher of my boyhood on the cover, Bánhalmi György, and the date, Január 1945, typed at the end of the first page—possibly a foreword?—entitled Előszó. The name of Hungary's capital city, Budapest, appeared next to the date. I know only a few words of Hungarian, yet these days online dictionaries are only a few computer keystrokes away, so I downloaded a Hungarian one. *Így végződött*. Was it something about a piece? Something about "a life"? An "ending"?

I thought I knew what this was. I had kept an eye open for it while working through the many papers, recordings, diaries, compositions, photos, and other documents of George (Hungarian: György) Bánhalmi (1926–1985), my teacher from 1964 to 1969. He was at that time chairman of



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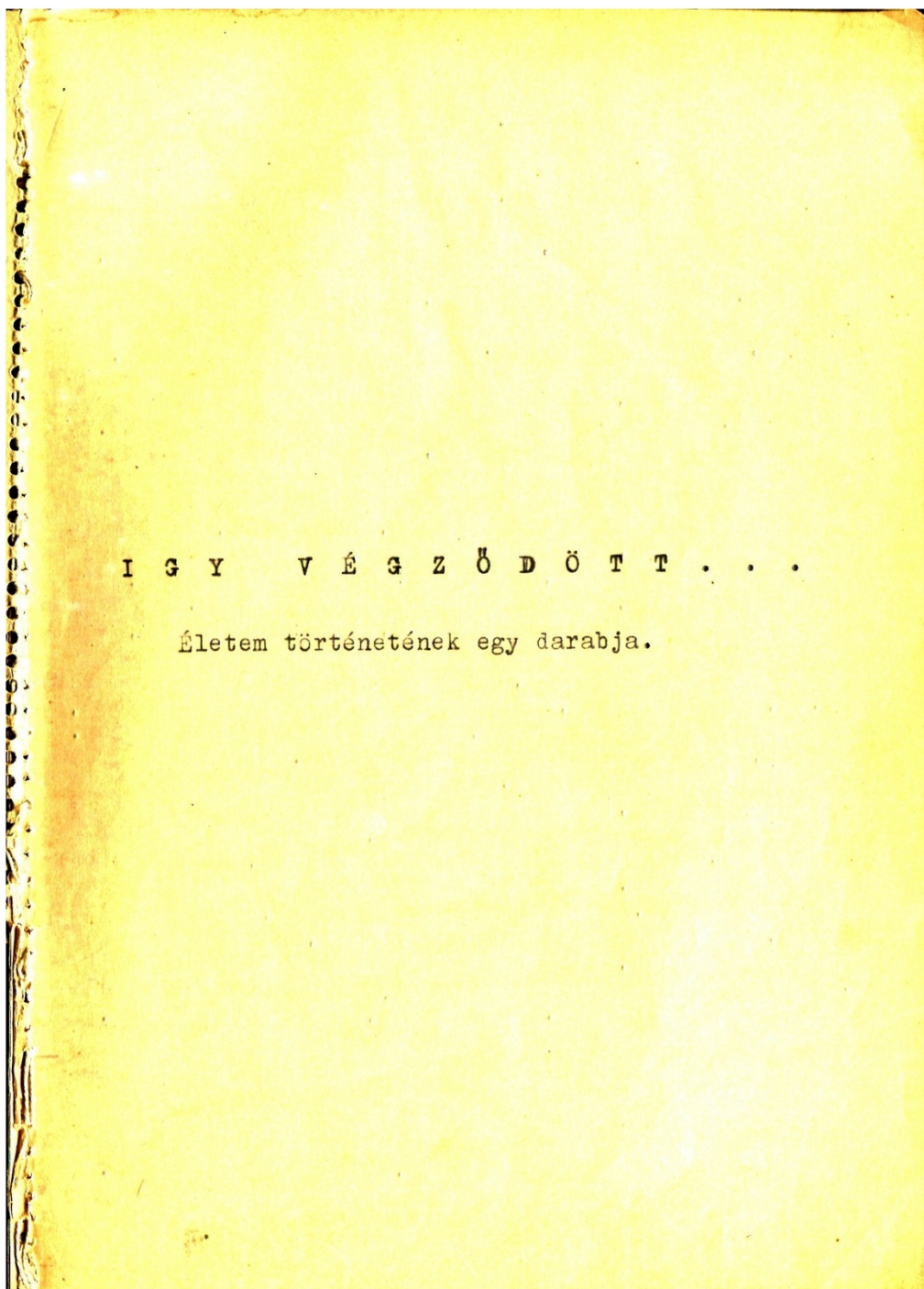
the piano department at a community music school, the Music Center of the North Shore, in Winnetka, Illinois. Some years after his death I had undertaken to organize these materials, with the assistance and permission of Bánhalmi's daughter, Susan Bánhami-Katz, in order to enrich his legacy. I had greatly admired him. He had introduced me to the musical works of Czerny, Beethoven, Haydn, Liszt, Grieg, Bach, Bartók, and many others. Some of his lessons, those in which he performed sections of a masterwork, thrilled me. He once stunned me—particularly with his performance of Liszt's darkly dramatic *Funérailles*. He told me that his performance of that work had helped to win him the Liszt prize in Hungary.

The materials from his estate that interested me included many tape recordings of his concerts in the United States, publicity material dating back to the 1940s and 50s in Hungary, award diplomas from several international competitions, and a stack of carefully notated original compositions. I had set to work digitizing the recordings and scanning the printed materials and photographs.¹ Like the Hungarian language, to me—a baseball-playing American kid who loved classical music—he was a somewhat exotic representative of an Old World culture, a piano virtuoso launched in the nineteenth century who landed in the twentieth.

Bánhalmi's widow, the late Kornélia Sternberg Bánhalmi, who had survived him by some fifteen years, once told me of a memoir that he had written about his time in forced labor in Hungary during World War II. Like many survivors, he had not much wished to speak of those dark days, and certainly not to one of his students. His daughter, Susan, told me that he did not speak very much of this either within the family. Bánhalmi clearly had much to do in a busy life in music comprised of teaching, performing, and composing. In a newspaper interview, Bánhalmi had said of that difficult time during the war, "I saw atrocities that I do not wish to discuss."

The little book appeared to me as a mystery, a puzzle written in a language that few outside of Hungary speak. Hungarian is challenging to non-Hungarians, at least partly because it is unrelated to any other European languages save Finnish and Estonian, to which it is only distantly related. I figured the booklet would tell a sad story, although I knew of course that Bánhalmi had survived whatever had happened to him as documented in these pages. His account would have, after a fashion, a happy ending. I held the little book lightly in hand, showed it to his daughter in whose Streamwood, Illinois, home I had found it. She had not known of its existence. I knew that it contained a dark story that took place many years ago and far away from the Midwestern United States where I now stood.

¹ Susan Bánhalmi-Katz and I have given electronic copies of documents relating to Bánhalmi's years of study and performance in Hungary, as well as digital audio files of his many US concerts, to the Music History Division of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences.



Előszó.

Az íráshoz nem értek. Mégis olyan jól esik egy kicsikét kiönteni valahova azt a szerintem sok-sok mondánivalót egy naplószerű, regényszerű kis könyvessékében, melyet azért egyáltalában nem óhajtok a nyilvánosság elé teregetni. Legfőképpen azért nem, mert rettenetesen bántana, mindig magamat és környezetemet helyezni a cselekmény előterébe, miként May Károly. Nem álszerénytelenség ez, ne gondolja a kedves olvasó - így fogom nevezni azt a szerencsétlen egyént, akinek elég ideje lesz élményeimet végigolvasni. S egyben mindjárt kéréssel fordulok hozzá. Tekintsen el ettől a kis hibától, hiszen mindenki csak a saját szeméből láthatja a világot.

Én a magam részéről igen sok élettapasztalatot szereztem ez alatt a pár hónap alatt, azt hiszem, még is fizettem érte bőven. Isten tudja? Most, hogy mindezeken az eseményeken túl vagyunk, úgy látom: ez az életleírás, bár hogyan is vesszük, egy szerencsés ember naplója. Egy nagyon szerencsésé. Hogy miért? Aki tudja, mi az: munkatábor, és mi várt a munkaszolgálat címén halálgyárakba behívott szerencsétlenek sokaságával, az nem fogja feltenni ezt a kérdést. Én, szerencsétlen, /vagy szerencsés?/ azt gondoltam, az én sorsom a legsanyarubb, nekem esik a legtöbb bajom. Önzés ez, jócsomó érzékenységgel keverve. Emiatt is kérem a kedves olvasó elnézését.

Ugy gondolom, igyekeztem alapjában véve humorosan felfogni az egész eseménysorozatot, bármennyire is nem úgy látszik. Utólag persze könnyen nevetünk, mondhatja bárki - és igaza van.

Még valamit. Mondanom sem kell talán, hogy amit itt leírtam, egyenlő a színigazsággal. Semmi, de semmi érdekem nem fűződik ahhoz, hogy akár a magam előnyösebb beállítása, akár az izgalomkeltés céljából egy hajszállal is elferdítsem az igazságot. Így történt, ahogy itt leírtam.

Tehát lapozzunk vissza az időben!

Budapest, 1945 január havában.

Soon after finding the manuscript, I took the tattered booklet and, one typewritten Hungarian page at a time, scanned it into jpeg format, after which I converted the images to pdf format. The resulting electronic document was 275 megabytes. Next, I contacted the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and inquired about the possibility of finding a translator. They had no such capability. I also wrote about the manuscript to the Yad Vashem archive in Israel. Neither institution could provide, or fund, translation services. I knew that Indiana University, my *alma mater*, has a strong department of Central Eurasian Studies. Listed on the department website was a professor named Lynn Marie Hooker, who had earned a PhD from the University of Chicago and who taught Hungarian studies. I contacted Professor Hooker, who did not think she could take on the project but referred me to her good friend, Dr. Márta Goldmann, a Hungarian scholar and professor of English living in Budapest and teaching at the University of Western Hungary (today ELTE Savaria University Centre) in Szombathely, Hungary. Dr. Hooker told me that Dr. Goldmann, whose academic expertise was in the work of James Joyce, also had strong interests in both the European Jewish Holocaust and in music.

I wrote to Dr. Goldmann by email and she replied that she was interested in doing the translation work. So we began to work together by email. I would send batches of scans and receive Márta's translations back in Microsoft Word format. I edited them a bit, sent them back to her, and thus we proceeded. I obtained some start-up funding to pay for the translation from the A. N. and Pearl G. Barnett Family Foundation in Chicago.

As the translated pages came back into my inbox, I of course read them with interest, and with increasing sadness. I had read Holocaust literature by Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and others, and I had seen documentaries and movies; for example, *Judgement at Nuremberg* and *Schindler's List*. Nevertheless, I felt particularly disturbed to be reading of a victim-survivor that I knew personally. *At least*, I thought as I read of his persecution, *I know that he survived to have a fruitful life after 1945, although he once said to me of the eleven years (1945–1956) that he lived under Soviet communist rule: "Jeff, the communists were just as bad as the Nazis ... only slower!"* In autumn 1956, during the uprising against the Soviet-controlled regime, Bánhalmi and his wife, newly married, left Hungary. By 1957 the couple had settled in the United States, first in New York City and then Chicago.

Bánhalmi had written in his foreword that he did not intend to publish *Így végződött*, and his daughter and I considered that statement. We wondered: *Should we do so?* Bánhalmi wrote that a reason for not publishing was that he did not want to draw attention to himself, and upon reading this, Susan said, "Oh, that sounds so typical of him!" Of course, George knew full well that drawing attention to oneself was a concert pianist's business, but that this sort of attention was paid for with effort, and not for having suffered at the hands of thugs and bullies.

However, Bánhalmi had clearly taken great pains not only to write this account but also to have it—perhaps by himself—typed. His memoir tells a "dear reader" that this was exactly what happened. It reads as a careful description of the six months preceding its writing, and included

numerous conversations in which he, other captives, and the group "officers" participated. It looked to me to be in publishable condition: no apparent mistakes, no crossings out, no handwritten corrections. He states in an introduction that it was a relief to write of the abusive situations in which he had found himself, day after day, with no end in sight: "[I]t still feels so very good to pour out, to release somewhere, a little bit of all I want to say in a diary-like, novel-like booklet." I suspected that the writing of this memoir was a form of therapy for him, helping him find a path to healing that would direct him back to his previously planned studies at Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy.

Well before the coming of the analyst's couch, writing has long been acknowledged as one of the healing arts. What Bánhalmi had been through was so clearly and so horribly out of any norm that he likely shook his head in disbelief afterward. I wonder if he, and other survivors, asked at times, "Did this really happen?"

I think George's setting down of this memoir, within weeks of obtaining his freedom, is significant. The ugly memories must have been fresh. I remembered him to be a scrupulously honest man, and a thoughtful man who said what he meant and meant what he said. As I read Márta's translation, I thought it an authentic record, recorded immediately after imprisonment, of Arrow Cross² abuse of Jewish Hungarians. In his foreword, Bánhalmi wrote, "I have no interest whatsoever in distorting the truth in the slightest way, in order to show myself in a more favourable light or to generate excitement. This is how it happened, the way I put it down here."

Bánhalmi's narrative focuses primarily on his own experience. At the time of his writing in early 1945 he would have had little knowledge of far greater horrors of the genocidal Nazi war against the Jews. His document communicates both an exact, detailed account of what he'd suffered, his shock over the reality of forced labor, and his grit in enduring its abuse.

George had completed his *gimnázium*³ education only a few weeks before his imprisonment. At nearly the same time that I found the memoir, I found another typewritten notebook containing George's own typewritten translation from the Latin into Hungarian of an entire satire by the Roman poet Juvenal. The translation runs to over fifty pages. George's talents were considerable and varied. They were not limited to music. His wife once told me that he had been in his youth a prizewinning expert at shorthand. In his forced labor memoir, he quotes both the poetry of Hungary's great nineteenth-century bard, Sándor Petőfi and that of Horace.

What sort of government throws a young man like that into forced labor? I wondered. Interrupting the education of a gifted young person, a son of a country that should have taken

²This far-right party, founded soon before World War II with an ideology comparable to Nazism and fascism, held power in Hungary from October 1944 to March 1945.

³A high school preparing students for university

pride in his accomplishments; in his, at least, ninety-three opuses of musical compositions⁴; in his ability to translate into their language a lengthy Latin literary work; and, in his admission to the prestigious, indeed, world-famous, Franz Liszt Academy⁵, where he would later become a star student in no less than five subject areas: piano performance, chamber music, conducting, composition, and percussion.

As I read this memoir and organized the other materials in Bánhalmi's estate, I read up on Hungarian twentieth-century history. Bánhalmi had been an only child, and his parents would have lived under the anti-Jewish laws for several years prior to German occupation in the spring of 1944. Hungary, an ally of Germany and therefore one of the Axis powers, deprived Jews of employment, housing, and other rights normally granted to Hungarian citizens. Hungary and its regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, initially did not effectuate the anti-Jewish laws with the same zeal as the Nazis did in Germany and in those countries they occupied, Poland in particular. However, with the arrival of the German army in 1944, that policy changed for the worse. Most of Budapest's Jews were relocated into ghettos, where they lived in cramped spaces. Deportations to death camps also began at that time. Some of Budapest's Jewish Hungarians were able to hide out in the city and elsewhere. In his memoir Bánhalmi mentions the address of his parents in Budapest as being 88 Szondi Street. As this is different from their previous home address at 67 Csengery Street, I think it possible that they had been forcibly relocated under the anti-Jewish laws.

The Jewish Virtual Library states that 15,000 Hungarian Jews had died in labor or concentration camps before the German occupation (Jewish Virtual Library), but that the March 1944 German invasion stepped up the persecution in that spring, including mass deportations to concentration camps such as Auschwitz in Poland. At this time the Nazis from Germany brought the spirit of the "Final Solution" to Hungary. Adolf Eichmann, a high-ranking officer of the German SS, came to Budapest, and was the zealous senior administrator of that murderous policy in Hungary. Bánhalmi's detention was a direct result of Eichmann's genocidal program. According to the Yad Vashem website, 565,000 Jewish Hungarians had been murdered by war's end ("Murder of Hungarian Jewry").

George's memoir indicates that because he was born in 1926, he avoided deportation to a death camp such as Auschwitz. Had George been born more than six months later, his fate, as bad as it actually was, would likely have been worse. Signs that he saw posted on the streets of Budapest

4 In Bánhalmi's hand-notated compositions, I found a piano concerto, dated 1942, when he would have been sixteen. It was his "Opus 94," and I therefore assume that this precocious young person had already composed ninety-three other musical works! An opus is numbered according to the chronological order of the composer's production.

5 Graduates include such luminaries of the concert world as Sir Georg Solti, George Szell, Eugene Ormandy, Fritz Reiner, Lili Krauss, János Starker, Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, Andras Schiff, and György Ligeti.

indicated that those born between 1896 and 1926 were to report for forced labor. Some Jewish children, such as Bánhalmi's wife Kornélia Sternberg (born 1935), were assimilated into the non-Jewish population, their ethnicity hidden.

Most of the deported Hungarian Jews went to death camps such as Auschwitz, and their odds of survival were, of course, far lower than Bánhalmi's. He reflects, in the foreword to his memoir, that even though at times he thought himself to be the unluckiest person alive, he came to understand that he was relatively fortunate. After the war, he saw that he had been lucky that as an eighteen-year-old he had been assigned to "forced labor" rather than deported to a death camp. He entered forced labor from Budapest's Keleti train station, one of the main stations for travel to and from that city. I have walked the distance between his home address on Csengery Street and Keleti; it is roughly a mile. He would have walked that distance with the allotted and limited amount of personal items.



A mural on one of the walls of today's Keleti train station

Reading Marta's translations, I sometimes wondered if I wanted to read further as the pages accumulated. When George was performing and teaching at Chicago's Music Center of the North Shore (today the Music Institute of Chicago), where I studied with him, he had become a beloved member of that school's faculty, a lively and positive presence. He was generous in sharing his talents and knowledge and did so happily. A former board member of the Music Center once told me of her affection for George and of an incident that she thought typified his attitude: a student of another piano faculty member had entered a competition in which one of George's students was also to compete. During a run-through student recital in which both

students performed, George saw that the other teacher's student had mistakenly learned from the wrong edition (competitions sometimes specify exactly which edition the competitors must use). He jumped up after the performance, ran to his studio for a correct copy of the music, and made sure the other student and his teacher knew of their error before it was too late. This was his soft touch. George liked competitions, good showdowns where everyone did their best after having prepared carefully. But in his mind, the competition had to be fair.

I did not like reading of this good-hearted man being mistreated in forced labor, sometimes terribly so. Inmates were not well fed and slept in poor conditions, too hot in summer and too cold in autumn and early winter. As I sat during this time over brunch with a friend in a restaurant in Evanston, near Chicago, I explained to him some of my misgivings about publishing. I wondered out loud at one point if George's grandchildren should, or would want, to read the memoir. I was having qualms. After a time, a man who had been sitting at a table near ours, came over to me and said, "Listen, I'm a child psychiatrist, and I overheard your conversation. If I were the grandson, I would want to know. I would want to know"—he continued emphatically—"that my grandfather was resilient, resourceful, and that he survived." Putting aside my first thought that this doctor should not have been eavesdropping, I considered his admonishment. I thought it a good one, and I asked myself: would I actually feel any better if I stopped translation and publication? What purpose would suppression serve? In any case, Bánhalmi, after disavowing publication, directly and clearly addresses a "dear reader" in the opening paragraph.

I remained impressed as I read further that an eighteen-year-old had written this detailed account of that horrid six-month period. No young man, gifted or otherwise, should be lied to, arrested, and abruptly pushed onto an overcrowded cattle car on his eighteenth birthday, June 5, 1944, while carrying a birthday cake baked by his mother. George describes the start of his dark journey vividly: the dispatching of him and his fellow Jewish males to a rural village to do meaningless work under harsh conditions while following pointless orders from brutal "supervisors." He writes frankly of three groups of Jewish male prisoners: a rather rough bunch from working class Budapest; a conservative, insular group of Orthodox Jews from rural Hungary; and, the intellectuals and artists, mostly from Budapest, with whom he fit in. The suffering they all endured, he wrote, was worsened by the alienation of these groups from each other. Neither of the former two groups much liked the "intellectuals."

Bánhalmi's memoir describes his mobilization into a badly administered "military support" group that labored in several locations within Hungary, initially Felsőhangony.⁶ Later he was transferred with members of his unit to work in the towns of Kecskemét, Szolnok, and Abony.

⁶ In his memoir Bánhalmi describes this town as "a small town in Gömör[-]Kishont County, in the Feled region, [with] 870 residents. Last known post office [in] Ózd."

Poor working and sleeping conditions, poor sanitation, bad and little food, abusive guards: those were the demons that hounded the inmate "soldiers." It also seemed to me that George was appalled by the stupidity of it all, its wastefulness as much as its brutality. He describes in detail, sometimes sarcastically, his living conditions, and writes an exact record of where he was and what he did. He saw a great deal: the worst of human nature, but also occasional acts of kindness by inmates, the outside population, and once even a German regular army sergeant named Lahngut assigned to airport-building duty in Kecskemét.

It was painful to read the eighteen-year-old version of the kindly teacher of young people that I knew being frustrated even by some of his fellow inmates. One inmate, formerly his high school classmate, pushed him away when all George sought was a friendly chat. Who would not seek some camaraderie in those threatening circumstances? Bad enough to be abused by the labor camp "leadership," but to find contempt within the ranks of his fellow detainees as well must have been especially dispiriting. That he carried on is a tribute to his emotional strength. He fortunately kindled friendships with a few other inmates, in particular fellow musicians: "I formed a group made up of musicians. We were five: Gyuri Lichter with tremendous theoretical knowledge [of music]; Jani Vázsony, who played the violin quite well; Gábor Paneth, who played the clarinet well and was an excellent art historian; and Sanyi Händler, who played the piano—if only we had had instruments and the opportunity [to play them]." He also mentions a fellow inmate and friend, jazz pianist Tamás Balassa, whose lively swing and boogie-woogie style jazz recordings from the 1950s and 60s are available on YouTube.

While his work group paved roads at the airport in Kecskemét, five American fighter planes attacked the airport, as Bánhalmi was to recount. As the planes, which had been escorting a formation of bombers, descended to low altitudes, he and his fellow inmates were able to run for cover in nearby woods where protective trenches had been dug. He writes of the deafening, nerve-shattering attack by the Allied planes, armed with phosphorous (incendiary) shells, and of the utter destruction of fourteen German Messerschmidt-323 Gigant (Giant) airplanes that never got off the ground during the attack. Incidents like this, and news occasionally received in a clandestine way, of Allied advances from both East and West, encouraged the inmate workers that the war could come to an end. As he surveyed the devastation wrought by the American fighter planes, he wrote, "We were not sorry." He also added, somewhat sarcastically, "Where were the famous heroic aerialists, the noble soldiers and their German comrades, who ... run down the enemy with ecstatic enthusiasm? Why did they not prevent or at least attempt to prevent aircraft worth millions from such rapid destruction?"

In another incident, Bánhalmi and his squad of workers came under Russian artillery fire. They ran for their lives across a bridge spanning Hungary's Tisza River near the town of Újszász. One wonders at the irony of being so directly in harm's way under the guns of your best hope, the Russian Red Army. An artillery attack, as so many combat veterans have testified, is a terrifying thing.

The American fighter plane attack and the appearance, high above, of American "Liberator" (B-24) bombers on raids must have been encouraging, though the effects of their bombing missions against targets in Austria and Romania would have been unknown to the inmates of George's labor battalion. The Western armies battling through France in the summer of 1944 must have seemed distant to Bánhalmi and his fellow detainees, although he writes that he did somehow learn of the June 6 Allied invasion of Normandy. To the east, the Russians must have appeared a better, more proximate hope.

As the Russian army pushed westward through Hungary, administration of the work groups weakened, and Bánhalmi, with a few of his friends, was able to make his way by train back to Budapest. There he found his parents on Szondi Street; registered for further work, at a synagogue; and obtained a "Schutzpass"⁷ issued by the Swiss embassy. For a time, he worked in a group that baked and cooked for the German army. By pulling rank, an officer of the German unit, a Lieutenant Wuchte, even once rescued Bánhalmi's work group from detention by the Arrow Cross.

George's memoir concludes with his attainment of freedom as he awoke one morning to find that his Budapest neighborhood had been taken over by the Red Army. This surely brought a sense of relief with it, although for many Hungarians it also brought more suffering. Susan told me that her grandmother had quipped during the long Russian occupation after the war, "I once said that I'd give *anything* if the Russians would kick out the Germans ... and they [the Russians] took me up on it!"

In his book *Budapest 1900*, John Lukacs writes of the direct aftermath of the battle of Budapest:

Coming out of their cellars, the people of Budapest found their city destroyed. The bridges, and many of the famous buildings, were in ruins. [...] Seven of every ten buildings were badly damaged.... Nearly all the windows in Budapest were broken and the winter of 1945 was unusually cold. Electricity, gas, the telephone, were nonexistent. [...] For more than a year after the siege it was extremely dangerous to walk the streets at night. (Lukacs: 220)

I have spoken with several Hungarians who lived through those times, and one reminded me that the Soviets were to be in Hungary far longer than the Nazis. Indeed, they were to rule for several generations after 1945. Bánhalmi, fortunately, did pursue his higher musical education at the Liszt Academy during the eleven years he remained in Hungary, and his parents survived those years, too. In fact, I met his mother in the 1970s when she visited the United States. Neither of his parents were deported during World War II, although I found documents that indicated his

⁷ A "Schutzpass" was a diplomatic passport that helped thousands of Budapest's Jews evade detention and persecution by the Arrow Cross. The Swiss embassy also established dozens of protected "safe houses" for Budapest's Jews.

father, Gyula, had been detained and robbed by the SS in the Hungarian city of Gödöllő. He had also served in forced labor for a time.

Despite the Soviet oppression to come, the Russian soldiers who occupied the Budapest sector in which Bánhalmi sheltered in early 1945 did humanity a great favor that day, although they could not have known the great good that would result from young Banhami's salvation. They could not have known of the five international piano competitions in which he would win prizes; of the many fine compositions he would create; and of the several generations of young people, such as me, who were fortunate to be touched and guided by his gifts in music. Bánhalmi writes of his "good fate" as he successfully navigated the precarious political waters of Budapest in late 1944. Years later good fate came again to bless and inspire us who were his students.

I suspect that Bánhalmi, at war's end, wanted to become known or remembered not as a "survivor" but as a brilliant musician. He surely must have wanted to resume his life as a musician as soon as possible. In fact, he had never really suspended it, having notated fragments of musical compositions when pencil, paper, and time were occasionally available during his time of forced labor.⁸ Having completed his baccalaureate just prior to his imprisonment, he would probably have entered the Liszt Academy as a full-time student later in 1945 or 1946.

I found two grade books from the Academy, dated 1949 and 1950. It was practice for a student to carry their small gradebook around to each of their teacher at the end of each term, requesting final grades and signatures. I picked out the signatures of notable Hungarian musicians from those years who had taught George: the director of the Academy, Ede Zathurezky, a celebrated violinist who had performed with Bartók; the fearsome and respected Leó Weiner; composers János Viski and Ferenc Farkas; conductors György Lehel and János Ferencsik; and Bánhalmi's piano professor, Béla Ambrózy. I saw that George had taken and passed a Russian language course, too.

In addition to *Így végződött*, I found many other items—documents, photographs, critical reviews, concert publicity—that recorded happier moments and fine achievements of Bánhalmi's life: concert programs, letters of recommendation (including ones from Frederick Reiner and Eugene Ormandy), photos of George in concert attire, and copies of periodical interviews made over the years with Bánhalmi. I enjoyed seeing these good things, representing moments of artistic achievement that were packed in the piles of paper with *Így végződött*. I hoped, as would any of us when imagining one's later years that the "bitter" had been outweighed by the "sweet."

⁸ Bánhalmi composed two works during the summer of 1944, "Nocturne for Clarinet and Piano" and "Menuetto" (for string quartet). The handwritten manuscript containing both works survives. *Nocturne* was written for his fellow inmate, Gyuri Lichther, whom Bánhalmi described in his unpublished memoir as "a passionate clarinet player" (Bánhalmi 1945: p. 19).

One particularly sweet time for Bánhalmi had been his advancement to the finals of the 1956 Queen Elisabeth [of Belgium] Competition, which, then as now, is one of the most prestigious of showdowns for musicians. Bánhalmi, Tamás Vásáry, and Peter Frankl represented Hungary, and all three were among the twelve finalists ("laureates") of the competition. Although Bánhalmi did not win one of the top medals, he finished ninth. However, all of the twelve laureates went on to notable career successes. Vladimir Ashkenazy of the Soviet Union and the Moscow Conservatory won the top prize, with John Browning of the USA and the Julliard School coming second.



Bánhalmi receiving his laureate diploma from Queen Elisabeth of Belgium

Bánhalmi also became known in postwar Hungary as a fine composer. I found a poster advertising a performance of his fine string quartet in 1955, and another for a performance of his song cycle, "Négy Kinai Dal" (Four Chinese Songs). I have myself played and recorded his set of twenty-four preludes for solo piano. Learning Bánhalmi's "Preludes" long after he had passed away was a great journey upon which I sometimes felt that I was meeting him again. Here was a familiar face, I felt, that had returned in music for an earthly visit. His lovely notation, his careful application of common (*Maestoso*, *Allegro vivace*) and less common (*ironico*, *umoroso*) Italian terms, his playful use of "asymmetric" rhythms, the kaleidoscopic survey of so many moods—all of this brought him back to me. *Why, it's him!* I often thought as I studied and played a new (to me) prelude twenty-four times.

Did dark memories of the days of fascist misery surface in Bánhalmi's music?⁹ Some of his preludes are certainly gloomy in character, yet others are humorous, some even joyful. That his nature, as I knew it, was optimistic suggests that he was not often haunted by black memories. However, one remarkable composition gives me pause: his 1955–1956 setting to music for low voice and piano Sándor Petőfi's 1847 poem "End of September," a dark, powerful work whose words, as translated by George Szirtes, are these:

*Below in the valley the flowers are resplendent,
Outside by the window the poplars still glow,
But see where the winter, already ascendant,
Has covered the far distant hilltops with snow.
My heart is still bathed in the fierce sun of passion,
All spring is in bloom there, by spring breezes tossed,
But look how my hair turns hoary and ashen,
Its raven black touched by the premature frost.*

*The petals are falling and life is declining.
Come sit in my lap, my beloved, my own!
You, with your head, in my bosom repining,
Tomorrow perhaps will you mourn me alone?
Tell me the truth: should I die, will your sorrow
Extend to the day when new lovers prepare
Your heart for forsaking, insisting you borrow
Their name, and abandon the one we now share?*

*If once you should cast off the black veil of mourning,
Let it stream like a flag from the cross where I lie,
And I will arise from the place of sojourning
To claim it and take it where life is put by,
Employing it there to dry traces of weeping
For a lover who could so lightly forget,
And bind up the wounds in the heart in your keeping
Which loved you before and will worship you yet.*

—Sándor Petőfi, 1847 (translated by George Szirtes)

Sándor Petőfi—who, many believe, died in 1848 as a martyr for the Hungarian cause against the Austrians (but while fighting the Imperial Russian Army)—writes here of love and angst. I had never discussed this poem with George, though as one of Hungary's most famous poems, taught in school, he presumably encountered it early in life. The writer declares, against the backdrop of

⁹ I do not believe that he suffered from PTSD. However Elizabeth Peterson, a friend of mine and a student of Bánhalmi's in composition remembers a brief incident when George was told by a uniformed security guard backstage at Chicago's Orchestra Hall that he would have to wait backstage until the rehearsal began (Elizabeth was to be his page-turner on-stage). George seemed irritated and upset in a way that was out of character, she recalled, and wondered if the interaction with a uniformed man in a position of authority caused a painful flashback.

a dying landscape and his aging body, his intention to remain loyal to his lover even after his death, no matter what she does after that. There is heroism in his voice, a tone that modern readers might think foolish. We today might think, skeptically, that the writer, hedging his bets in the sophisticated ways we know well, can easily afford to declare fidelity when he sees that he will die before she does. We might think him to be calculating. He won't have a chance to cheat or to fail her. I question that interpretation and believe nineteenth-century readers would have thought him a man of honor and passion, a tragic hero.

George, too, was surrounded by a landscape of darkness and danger, not only in forced labor, but during the battle of Budapest (January and February of 1945) and in the years of Soviet Stalinist rule that took hold by the late 1940s. He maintained, maybe something like Petőfi's aging lover contemplating his mortality, that even in an intransigent world one can choose to remain steadfast. I take inspiration from my teacher's backbone, his insistence on living creatively. If he ever did think of one of the thugs that supervised his work squad, I hope that when he looked around his studio at his beloved, carefully cataloged music scores or his competition diplomas on the wall; when he greeted his next student; or perhaps when he contemplated a future outing to Ravinia, that he understood that he was taking civilized revenge on that persecutor.

Bánhalmi performed "End of September" with baritone Ian Geller at a Dame Myra Hess concert in Chicago's Cultural Center in the 1980s. Fortunately, the broadcast concert was recorded by Chicago's fine arts radio station, WFMT, which can be accessed on YouTube.¹⁰

A mournful soliloquy in the piano part opens the work, played, as Bánhalmi always did, with great emotion. Geller's narrative sets the stage, evokes the dying landscape, as the writer's questions build. "... *should I die, will your sorrow / Extend to the day when new lovers prepare / Your heart for forsaking...?*" While a reader of the poem would likely assume the answer to be "yes," the listener to George's setting would, I think, be less sure. His musical narrative suggests that there is no answer to the question. The opening soliloquy's music returns to close the work in a somber solo. It is inconclusive, ruminative. The distant hills are still covered with snow, the petals still fall, life is still declining, but the writer has declared in the midst of that decline his intention to remain in love. He looks forward to being granted—in death, and not before—eternity. "End of September" concludes on two quiet, prayerful E-flat major chords, suggesting only then a suspension of suffering, perhaps even a kind of peace.

In 2016, several years after finding *Így végződött*, I journeyed to Budapest to attend a concert of Bánhalmi's music that had been set up by Márta and her partner, Gabor Murai. Gabor had known of grant money available to create events commemorating the 1956 uprising. He thought that a concert of George's music might qualify. I helped with the application process by writing a brief

¹⁰ The performance is on Bánhalmi's YouTube channel: George Bánhalmi.

essay on how my teacher had exemplified "the spirit of 1956." The grant, in the amount of seven thousand euros, was awarded, and several young, gifted Hungarian musicians were engaged to perform a program of Bánhalmi's solo piano music, his art songs, and his string quartet. The concert took place at the Kőrösi Csoma Sándor Cultural Center, on the outskirts of downtown Budapest, the city's 10th District, also known as Kőbánya. Tamás Vásáry participated by playing and by sharing memories of George. They had roomed together in an old castle as finalists in the prestigious 1956 Queen Elisabeth Competition. I was glad to see press coverage present; a television reporter interviewed Vásáry after the concert. The focus of the concert had of course been upon Bánhalmi as a composer, but the Jewish magazine *Szombat* had also written of the discovery of the memoir and printed some of its aged pages.

Several days after the concert, on a crisp sunny autumn afternoon, I left Budapest by train. I looked about Keleti railroad station (built in the 1880s) and took photographs of the station's elegant murals. The train ride back to Vienna was smooth, comfortable, and swift. During the years of communism, the distance between Budapest and Vienna was politically vast. It is now less than three hours by train. One's passport is not even checked at the Austrian border, as both countries are members of the European Union. The landscape looked much like my native rural American Midwest, filled with farm fields, seemingly empty of people, and peaceful. As fields of harvested wheat and grain flowed by, here on the *Kisalföld* (the plains of western Hungary) the golden, late afternoon sunlight appeared to me especially lovely.

At the end of his forced labor memoir, Bánhalmi listed twenty-five conditions that, had they not been fulfilled, would have resulted in disaster, possibly death, for him. "This," he concluded, "had been written in the book of Fate." And of our places in this Book of Fate, he wrote, "All of us are balls in the hands of Fate, flying up, falling down, and perhaps flying up again.... Perhaps." I mulled all of that over as I looked out the train car window at the flowing Hungarian plains. Whatever the conditions, fulfilled or unfulfilled, that had allowed me to be present at this beautiful concert, far from my home, I thought I could see Bánhalmi's hand of fate, tossing a ball upward; a ball that looked something like a musical note, floating yet ready to fall gently upon the Hungarian plains, somewhere near Hegyeshalom, a small town near the Austrian border, outside of my train window.



George Bánhalmi

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YouTube channel name: George Bánhalmi

Playlists (within the channel):

- George Bánhalmi: Solo Piano Performances
- George Bánhalmi: Original Compositions – Complete
- George Bánhalmi: Collaborative Performances (Excepting Piano Concertos)
- George Bánhalmi: Original Compositions – 24 Solo Preludes for Piano
- George Bánhalmi: Original Compositions – Youthful
- George Bánhalmi: Beethoven Bagatelles (VOX Records, 1958)
- George Bánhalmi: Concerto Cadenzas
- George Bánhalmi: Memorial Concert, Budapest, 2016
- George Bánhalmi: Chopin Cameos (VOX Records, 1958)
- George Bánhalmi: Concerto Performances
- George Bánhalmi: Radio Interviews