Rakita, Eszter. “Good Citizens or Nazi Spies? Background of an FBI Inquiry Against a Hungarian American Family.” Hungarian Cultural Studies. *Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association*, Volume 18 (2025): http://ahea.pitt.edu DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2025.598

Good Citizens or Nazi Spies?

Background of an FBI Inquiry Against a Hungarian American Family.

Eszter Rakita

Abstract: The United States entered the Second World War following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During the war, Japanese Americans faced persecution and even imprisonment due to their national heritage. The primary objective of this paper is to highlight that it was not only U.S. citizens of Japanese or German descent, but also Hungarian Americans, who could become targets of American authorities, albeit not to the same severe extent. The wartime atmosphere was so tense that the FBI responded to even the slightest rumors, launching investigations against law-abiding citizens who had no intention of undermining the American war effort. This paper examines the case of one Hungarian immigrant family—the Gondos family—as an illustrative example of how U.S. wartime intelligence targeted American citizens of “enemy alien” descent based solely on unsubstantiated rumors. Analyzing this case offers valuable insight into the experiences of wartime minorities in the United States. Therefore, the findings contribute to the historiography of twentieth-century American history, Hungarian migration history, and the academic field of American Studies.

***Keywords**: Hungarian-Americans, immigrant, investigation, denaturalization, discrimination, fifth column, twentieth-century history*

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Introduction

Hungarian immigrants experienced both World Wars while residing in the United States, even as the U.S. found itself at war with their country of origin. Nevertheless, the historiography in both the Hungarian and English languages offers limited information concerning the Hungarian diaspora during wartime. This paper presents a case study focusing on a Hungarian-American family, whose patriarch was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during the Second World War.

ISSN 1936-6879 (online)

This original research is grounded in primary sources named the *Gondos Family Papers,* housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.[1] Central to this study are the FBI investigation files, which form a crucial part of the archival collection. Family correspondence from key periods—particularly during both World Wars—is also frequently utilized. The Gondos Family Papers is a remarkably valuable collection of historical resources, including more than 1200 personal and official letters documenting the family's life throughout seven decades[2]. To provide further relevant historical context regarding the family's background, a memoir entitled *Recollections of My Early Youth, 1908–1921*, authored around 1978 by the youngest family member, Robert Zoltan Gondos, has proven particularly valuable. Interestingly, the FBI files became available when Robert, while compiling material for his memoir in the 1970s, submitted a request for documents concerning his father. Though he had expected records related to World War I, he instead received files from the World War II era. R. Z. Gondos' *Recollections* are used in this research as a narrative resource. As many historians, e.g., Pierre Nora already discussed, memoirs are essential sources (shards of memory as Nora puts it) but generally contain the perspective of the author (13). In this paper, the *Recollections* are used for obtaining information about the family's history and to some extent to provide personal viewpoints of the family members.

The primary aim of this study is to offer a case study that underscores how Hungarian Americans—like Japanese or German Americans—could become subjects of suspicion by U.S. authorities during wartime, albeit not to the same severe degree. The research further reveals that the FBI's accuracy was far from flawless. The tense wartime atmosphere prompted investigations based on the faintest rumors, even against a law-abiding citizen with a strong reputation, government contracts, and a son, Victor Gondos Jr., serving in the U.S. Army. By examining this narrative, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of wartime minority communities in the United States.

Historical Background

Renowned historians see a link between the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 and the flawed postwar peace settlements of 1919–1920 and the economic crisis of the 1930s (Taylor; Keegan). Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan and its allies. Although there was no formal declaration of war on Hungary, diplomatic relations were severed in December, and the two nations became official belligerents by June 1942. Following the U.S. entry into the war on the side of the Allies—mirroring developments during World War I—immigrants residing in America who originated from enemy nations were designated as "enemy aliens[3]." Among these groups,

[1] The Gondos Family Papers is a collection of historical sources documenting the life of Victor Gondos Sr. and his family in Hungary and in the United States throughout the twentieth century. The bulk of the collection consisted of ego-documents written mostly in English, mainly correspondence, a memoir, and several family photographs. There are also hundreds of official documents, including the files of an FBI investigation from the 1940s.

[2] I completed my PhD dissertation based on this collection of sources. The thorough analysis of their correspondence is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will provide some details relevant to the topic in the analysis section of the paper.

[3] About the nature of this type of legislation, in the case of World War I, see Ford.

Japanese Americans faced the most severe treatment[4]. Citizens of Japanese descent were designated as potential national security threats (Daniels 303). FBI investigations led to the arrest of several German and Italian Americans as well.

Hungarian-Americans in the Wartime United States

Hungary's participation in the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany was motivated by both perceived and actual injustices stemming from the Treaty of Trianon (see Romsics 827-835). For Hungarian Americans, the war once again placed their country of origin and their adopted homeland on opposing sides of a global conflict, echoing the experience of the First World War. The American Hungarian Federation hurried to clarify its position on this issue and sent a memorandum to the Federal Government on January 7, 1941, nearly a year before Pearl Harbor, in which they stated:

> American citizens with Hungarian origin were shocked to learn that the government of Hungary was unable to avoid the signing of the treaty with the Axis, and we are convinced that due to the signature the Hungarian Government lost its freedom of sovereign decision-making (Várdy 246).

Additionally, the *Movement for Independent Hungary*, initiated by the prominent Hungarian émigré politician Tibor Eckhardt,[5] publicly asserted that "the Hungarian nation is not responsible for the policies and acts of its present government, whose decisions are obviously subject to Nazi pressure" (Várdy 375). This statement exemplifies the broader efforts of influential members within the Hungarian American community to persuade both the American public and policymakers that Hungary's entry into the war was the result of coercion by Nazi Germany, rather than voluntary alignment. Following the United States' entry into the war, Hungarian Americans experienced what has been described as the "divided heart's dilemma" (Puskás 249–256). Many remained deeply concerned about the well-being of their compatriots in Hungary. As the extent of wartime devastation in Hungary became apparent, Hungarian Americans swiftly organized relief efforts, including the collection and shipment of medicine, clothing, and financial aid to their homeland. These humanitarian initiatives even mobilized individuals who had long since severed personal ties with their country of origin.[6]

Despite some internal conflicts, most Hungarian immigrants demonstrated loyalty to the United States. They actively supported the war effort by purchasing War Bonds, assembling and sending medical supply packages to soldiers, volunteering to donate blood, and through the military service of many second-generation Hungarian-Americans (Puskás 406–407). Compared

[4] About the experience of Japanese Americans in WWII, see Hinnershitz.

[5] Tibor Eckhardt (1888-1972) was a Hungarian politician who became a leading figure in the Hungarian anti-communist movement after 1945.

[6] This was the case with the subject of this research paper. According to archival sources and contemporary newspapers, Victor Gondos Sr., a mildly successful real estate developer in the 1920s and 1930s, tended to keep a distance from Hungarian-American communities. His stance was changed by the Second World War, since he joined the Hungarian relief efforts by joining the Philadelphia Száz Dolláros Egylet (Philadelphia Hundred-Dollar Union) in 1945. For further information about his connections and his attitude toward the Hungarian American communities, see. Rakita, "Bevándorlás."

to Japanese and German Americans, Hungarian-Americans experienced lower levels of scrutiny. One example of this was when the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), initiated inquiries into Hungarian-American organizations. These inquiries were limited in scope, consisting primarily of a single interview with Tibor Kerekes, Secretary General of the American Hungarian Federation. Based on Kerekes's responses, the OSS concluded that the majority of Hungarian Americans opposed the war and were disheartened by Hungary's declaration of war on the United States. In a comprehensive memorandum dated July 8, 1943, the Foreign Nationalities Branch of the OSS confirmed that, although revisionist propaganda from Hungary had some influence, the Hungarian-American population remained committed largely to the United States (Szilassy 48). Nonetheless, a small faction of Hungarian immigrants openly supported the Nazi regime, expressing their views through the Bridgeport-based newspaper *Egyetértés* (*Consensus*) (Puskás 250). This evidence suggests that the U.S. federal government did not view Hungarian-Americans as a significant threat. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility of investigations at the individual level. This paper, based on original research, presents one such case study.

The Axis Fifth Column vs. the FBI

During the Second World War, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was tasked with conducting anti-espionage investigations targeting citizens of enemy nations and American citizens of enemy descent. These investigations were driven by widespread fears of so-called "Fifth Column" activities—covert operations carried out by enemy sympathizers within a nation's borders.[7] While Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union were all accused of engaging in such activities, Nazi Germany was the primary focus of American concern. This fear provided a convenient explanation for Germany's rapid military victories in Europe (the *Blitzkrieg*), which many believed could not have occurred without internal assistance (MacDonnell 3). The resulting "spy hysteria," which had already taken root in several European countries, soon extended to the United States. Beyond that, past experiences with German sabotage and propaganda efforts during the First World War also lent some credibility to these concerns. Consequently, the White House, Congress, and the FBI publicly emphasized the threat posed by Nazi Fifth Column activities to national security (MacDonnell 6).

Two principal organizations were responsible for investigating suspected anti-American activities: the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the FBI. The House Committee—known as the Dies Committee after its chairman, Martin Dies—estimated that as many as 100,000 individuals were engaged in un-American conduct (Frank & Magyarics 349). However, conducting actual investigations into these individuals largely fell to the FBI. Beginning in 1936, the Bureau expanded its mandate to include counterintelligence, and in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially designated the FBI as the lead agency for espionage,

[7] The name "Fifth Column" itself is rooted in the time of the Spanish Civil War when General Emilio de Mola is thought to have said on a radio broadcast that the enemy was attacking Madrid in four columns, referring to four different directions, while a fifth column was working inside the city to support the attackers. These can be foreign agents or inside traitors whose task is to demoralize and divide the host country and assist the enemy regular army in an actual invasion. Espionage, sabotage, and subversion could be found among their most frequently used techniques.

counterespionage, and sabotage prevention. (MacDonnell 166). Following this directive, the FBI implemented widespread and continuous surveillance across American society, focusing on identifying and monitoring extremist organizations. During the war, the FBI was granted authority to surveil individuals without suspicion of a specific crime. As a result, even baseless rumors or unsubstantiated gossip could lead to an individual being investigated. The director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, encouraged civilian cooperation in the form of “listening posts”—citizens were expected to report suspicious activities and then defer to trained agents. He believed that broad public support was essential for successful counterintelligence operations, and to cultivate this support, he sought to maintain a heightened sense of threat from internal enemies within the American populace (MacDonnell 179–180).

Under Hoover’s leadership, the FBI engaged in a wide range of intelligence-gathering efforts, at times stretching or even violating legal boundaries, such as stealing evidence or breaking into private property (MacDonnell 80). He authorized agents to collect personal information on individuals suspected of sympathizing with Germans, Italians, or communists, as these groups were considered most likely to engage in Fifth Column activities. FBI agents compiled lists of potential members of various so-called radical and fascist organizations operating in the United States. This effort also extended to identifying newspapers’ editors, publishers, and subscribers perceived to be associated with fascist or communist ideologies. The objective was to ascertain these individuals’ identities, objectives, and social networks, along with any other relevant personal or professional information. To this end, the Bureau frequently employed covert techniques such as infiltration, wiretapping, placing listening devices, maintaining informants, and reviewing public, personal, educational, and employment records (Weiner). Despite the questionable legality and ethical ambiguity of Hoover’s methods, the FBI succeeded in preventing enemy espionage activities on American soil during the Second World War (MacDonnell 182).

The Gondos FamilyFamily Background

Before addressing the primary subject of this study, relevant context and biographical background on the Gondos family, who were the focus of the FBI inquiry, must be provided. This information is essential for a better understanding of the accusations and statements contained within the FBI files and may also assist in evaluating the credibility of those allegations.

The patriarch of the Gondos family, and the central figure of this investigation, Victor Gondos Sr., was born on March 15, 1879, in Szilágycseh (now in Romania), to Dr. Mór Gondos, a physician, and Rozália Lindenfeld. His family originated from Zemplén County in eastern Hungary. Victor had two sisters, Fanni and Eszter, and two brothers, Sándor (later known as Alexander) and Gyula. He completed his studies in civil engineering at the Royal Technological University in Budapest in the early 1900s and subsequently earned a doctorate in political science. He married his wife, Irene Trautmann, in 1901. They had two sons, Victor Jr., born on July 20, 1902, and Robert Zoltán, born on February 2, 1905—both in Budapest. In the early 1900s, Victor worked as an engineer and taught mathematics and science at the Metallurgical College in Temesvár. After working for several years in the United States, the family immigrated to America in the summer of 1911 and settled in New York City.

Around the same time, Victor’s brother Alexander (1877–1960) and his wife Gizella also immigrated. To fully grasp the FBI’s perspective during the 1940s investigation, a brief

introduction to Alexander Gondos is warranted. In Budapest's journalistic circles, Alexander was a somewhat infamous figure. He worked as a journalist in various locations, including Budapest, Transylvania, and Paris. His involvement in dubious ventures in Hungary is well-documented: he reportedly posed as a hypnotist to scam patrons in coffeehouses and sold medications illegally (Gulyás 105). At one point, he faced legal trouble with the Budapest Police Department for harassing and attempting to blackmail a young woman (*Pesti Hirlap*, May 19, 1911). Alexander eventually immigrated to the United States. Upon his arrival, his brother Victor helped him find employment. However, Alexander soon became a source of trouble for his brother. He later secured a position in the American Hungarian press, where he published provocative articles, often under the pseudonym A. S. Glenn. These writings manipulated public opinion regarding the political situation in Hungary and favored the policies of Prime Minister István Tisza.[8] Alexander became the subject of news coverage when he agitated politically on behalf of the Hungarian government by attempting to obstruct the American fundraising efforts of prominent opposition leader Mihály Károlyi[9] (Gulyás 105).

In the First World War

When the First World War began, the status of citizens from the Central Powers became increasingly precarious in the United States. By 1917, both official policy and public sentiment had grown markedly hostile toward them. As Julianna Puskás puts it, "preparation for the war […], pumped up American nationalism and distrust and animosity toward 'aliens.'" Some were attacked or dismissed from their jobs, their stores were boycotted, etc. (179–180). Additionally, the infamous Dumba[10] Affair of 1915, in which the Austro-Hungarian ambassador attempted to organize strikes and sabotages in American factories to prevent them from providing arms and equipment to England and France, further aggravated already negative impressions about Hungarian immigrants (see Ambrus). This was a crucial issue because the majority of the American coal, iron, steel, and ammunition industry's labor force was provided by the nationalities from Austria–Hungary (Higham 213).

The Gondos family experienced these developments firsthand. It is instructive to revisit events from 1915, which later resurfaced in relevance during the Second World War. In the autumn of 1915, Victor Gondos Sr. and his brother, Alexander, were arrested and imprisoned. Although their alleged offense was relatively minor, the broader wartime context seemed to amplify its significance, as "larger influences were at work" (Gondos, *Recollections* 45). The incident can be reconstructed as follows: the Gondos brothers had established an English-language newspaper, the *Bridgeport Daily News*, which reportedly published numerous pro-German articles. These drew the attention of British intelligence services. In November that year, Victor, as the newspaper's owner, and Alexander, as its editor, allegedly attempted to coerce a Hungarian American banker from Manhattan, Julius Pirnitzer, into purchasing advertising space. They threatened to publish disparaging content about him in their newspaper should he refuse.

[8] István Tisza (1861—1918) was Hungary's Prime Minister from 1903 to 1905, and later from 1913 to 1917.

[9] Mihály Károlyi (1875–1955) was a Hungarian opposition politician who served as a Member of Parliament from 1910 and went on to become the first President of the Republic of Hungary in 1918.

[10] Konstantin Theodor Dumba was the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to the US between 1913 and 1915.

At a subsequent meeting, Pirnitzer had arranged for two detectives to be concealed in an adjacent room. Following a heated argument, the detectives arrested the Gondos brothers. However, the case against them proved tenuous: the confrontation occurred in Hungarian, a language the detectives did not understand. So, the entire case was only supported by Julius Pirnitzer's statement.[11] Under ordinary circumstances, such lack of evidence would likely have resulted in a dismissal of the charges. However, suspicions of subversive activity had already begun to surface in connection with the brothers, prompting the American Secret Service to pressure the presiding judge to secure a conviction—at least for a misdemeanor offense. This may have contributed to efforts by the authorities to link the brothers to a bomb plot, a claim that appeared in newspapers across the United States—from Connecticut to Arizona—and even in Hungary.[12] Ultimately, Victor and Alexander Gondos were sentenced to six months at Blackwell's Island Reformatory,[13] though only on charges of attempted extortion.

They were released in the summer of 1916. After the American entry into the war on April 6, 1917, the Gondos family members were designated as enemy aliens, similar to other nationals of the Central Powers. According to Zoltan's memoir, Victor Sr. feared that any mishap at the nearby Remington ammunition factory in Bridgeport might result in their being implicated. Anticipating interrogation, the family relocated to a less conspicuous area and chose Cleveland, Ohio. After a brief stay in Cleveland, they moved again—to Dayton, where Alexander was residing. Shortly after their arrival in Dayton, Victor was summoned by a local U.S. Marshal to explain the reason for the move. Victor managed to persuade the Marshal that the relocation was motivated solely by a desire to be closer to his brother. He was released without further incident (Gondos, *Recollections* 42–48). [14]

Building a Business

Soon after the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, the wartime restrictions were lifted. The postwar economy entered a period of rapid growth, particularly in the construction sector, and the opportunity emerged for Victor Sr. to establish his own independent construction company. Throughout the 1920s, the Gondos family business flourished. The

[11] Julius (Gyula) Pirnitzer was a Hungarian American banker who soon came under suspicion for partaking in anti-American activities. He was interned by the US authorities in 1918. Several American newspapers published stories about his internment during the summer and fall of 1918. According to these articles, Pirnitzer and his associates were arrested as "dangerous enemy aliens." See *The New York Tribune*, September 8, 1918, p. 8. This article also includes a short biography of Pirnitzer. My hypothesis is, although not yet supported by evidence, that the Gondos brothers might have learned about Pirnitzer's anti-American activities in 1915, and used this information to extort money from him—leading to the arrest and imprisonment of the brothers.

[12] Some American newspapers that published the story about the incident and the alleged bomb plot in November 1915: *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer* (CT), *New York Tribune* (NY), *Perth Amboy Evening News* (NJ), *Richmond Times* (VA), *The Pensacola Journal* (FL), Albuquerque Morning Journal (NM), *The Arizona Republican* (AZ). These volumes are available at chroniclingamerica.com.

[13] Blackwell's was a penitentiary in New York City, located on an island in East River. Today, the island is known as Roosevelt Island. The prison was renamed Welfare Island in 1921 and was shut down in 1934. Further information: http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/nycdoc/html/blakwel1.html

[14] Robert Z. Gondos writes extensively about this period in his memoir. The family's experiences from this period are summarized from Gondos' *Recollections*. Additionally, pieces of the family's correspondence are used. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.*

company was responsible for constructing numerous public buildings, including schools, silk mills, hotels, and residential structures. However, the onset of the Great Depression in 1932 severely impacted the business, leading to several years of financial hardship[15].

Recovery began in 1935, when the company, aided by some political support, secured contracts from the Public Works Administration (PWA), a New Deal agency created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Notably, Victor's elder son, Victor Jr., pursued a military career. Beginning in 1924, he served in the Coast Artillery Reserve Corps while simultaneously working for his father's company. He was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1926 and to Captain in 1930. Although a serious illness later curtailed his military career, his service was held in high esteem[16].

The FBI inquiry regarding Victor Gondos Sr.

This section of the study aims to describe and analyze the contents of the FBI files related to the investigation into Victor Sr. and, partly, his older brother, Alexander Gondos. The bulk of the information included was derived from the FBI case file in the Gondos Family Papers at HSP. The section is supplemented by an examination of family correspondence in order to assess whether the accusations had any factual basis.

The investigation took place between 1941 and 1943, as indicated by the first available FBI report, dated May 11, 1943, authored by an unnamed agent. According to this report, the inquiry was initiated after the Bureau received derogatory information about Gondos from an undisclosed source. The primary allegation was that "the subject and his son, ROBERT Z., are definitely pro-Nazi." The informant also claimed that all of their employees were foreigners, one of whom had allegedly remarked during the German invasion of the Netherlands that soon everyone in the United States would be saying "Heil Hitler."[17]

In addition, another source informed the FBI that Victor Sr. had previously been investigated by a federal agency during the First World War and that one of his current employees had recently been arrested for espionage. Perhaps most notably, it was claimed that in 1941, Victor Sr. had attended a meeting of the German American Bund—of which he was purportedly a member—during which several pro-Nazi propaganda films were shown. Based on these supposed interactions and affiliations, the informant concluded that Victor Sr. held pro-German sympathies.

As a result of these allegations, the FBI sought to determine whether sufficient evidence could be gathered to justify denaturalization on the grounds of federal offenses. During the investigation, agents searched his office, interviewed acquaintances, neighbors, and former colleagues, and reviewed various personal and public documents relating to the family. The inquiry spanned multiple states, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. The FBI collaborated with several municipal police departments—such as those in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Dayton, Chicago, and New York City—

[15] The details of family history are summarized from the memoir of Robert Z. Gondos, and selected pieces of family correspondence.

[16] For further reading about the detailed biography of Victor Gondos Jr, Rakita, "Bevándorlás.".

[17] The quotes were recorded word-by-word by the FBI agent responsible for the investigation. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Gondos, Victor Sr., Denaturalization Proceedings, Washington, DC, 1943, FBI. 2.

and with federal agencies, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the War Department. The investigation centered on three primary questions; whether Victor Sr. supported Nazi ideology, whether he had engaged in espionage, and whether he had demonstrated loyalty to the United States at the time of his naturalization (FBI 3).

Several factors appeared to support the Bureau’s suspicions. Notably, the extortion case involving Victor and his brother Alex during the First World War—previously described—was linked at the time to a possible anti-American plot, although this was mentioned only in passing in the documents. Alex Gondos, on the other hand, further complicated matters. The FBI discovered that Alex had previously purchased a Hungarian-language newspaper in Dayton and allegedly intended to form a “National Foreign Press Association,” which, allegedly, could have been used for disseminating disloyal propaganda. This led to the suspicion that he might still have been involved in pro-Hungarian propaganda efforts.

Additional concerns arose from Victor Sr.’s use of the alias “Bondansky” while living in Dayton in 1918. During his interrogation by the U.S. Marshal at that time, he admitted that he had adopted the false name out of fear that his criminal record under the name “Gondos” would hinder employment opportunities. The FBI also alleged that he and his wife had served as false witnesses at the naturalization hearing of Alex Gondos in 1929. Unfortunately, my research yielded no further information regarding this specific incident.

As the FBI files reveal, suspicions were initially aroused by the discovery of a small radio set in Victor Gondos Sr.’s office, found during a search conducted with the assistance of an undercover officer from the Philadelphia Police Department. To assess its potential use in espionage, the FBI consulted the Federal Communications Commission. Upon inspection, the Commission concluded that the device was too small for espionage-related activities. The agents also interviewed several witnesses to gather information about Gondos’s character. All those questioned were acquaintances—primarily neighbors—of the subject, and they uniformly spoke positively of him and his family. One neighbor, for example, acknowledged that the Gondos family was not particularly popular in the area due to their foreign origins but emphasized that they had never expressed any anti-American sentiments. This witness recalled Victor Sr. once saying, “We don’t like the Germans; someday Hungary will be free again.” Another witness confirmed that, in her many conversations with Mrs. Gondos, she had never heard any comments in favor of the Axis powers. However, Mrs. Gondos had once remarked that American anti-German propaganda was somewhat crude.

Additional insight came from one of Victor Sr.’s former colleagues, who asserted unequivocally that the subject was not a Nazi sympathizer. On the contrary, when Victor learned that an acquaintance harbored Nazi views, he severed ties with him immediately. In further interviews, the agents sought to determine Victor’s loyalty to the United States. All four witnesses interviewed at this stage expressed unanimous support for his patriotic credentials. One individual stressed that Victor had no interest in Germany or the Axis powers and pointed out that his son was employed by the War Department and was “well thought of among the military men.” Another witness dismissed the allegation that Victor Sr. had been affiliated with the German American Bund, stating that he had never been a member of any German organizations. The only event he had attended that could be linked to German culture was a meeting of a singing society (FBI 5).

To supplement the interviews, the agents reviewed a range of official and personal documents to construct a comprehensive background profile of the Gondos family. None of the

documents contained any incriminating or suspicious information about any family member. Collectively, the evidence strongly suggested Victor Gondos Sr.'s innocence and undermined the credibility of the accusations made against him. An additional consideration, which further complicates the allegations, is the nature of the relationship between the Gondos family and the federal government. The FBI's suspicion appears contradictory, given that the U.S. government entrusted the Gondos construction company with multiple contracts by during the war.

Although the investigation appeared to be thorough, it was not without inaccuracies. For example, the FBI consistently recorded the wrong date for Victor Gondos Sr.'s arrival in the United States. According to their files, he had been living in the U.S. since 1900, when, in reality, his first arrival occurred in 1904. Additionally, the Bureau overlooked Irene Gondos's German origins and mistakenly believed that the older son, Victor Jr., was American-born. They also confused Alex Gondos Sr. with his son, Alex Jr., who was approximately the same age as Victor Sr.'s sons. In one report, the agents admitted to having initially collected information on an "Alex Gondos," only to later realize that the individual in question was too young to be the person they were targeting—concluding it must have been Alex Jr. Notably, the FBI was never able to locate Alex Gondos Sr. throughout their investigation. Similarly, they found no supporting evidence for the claim that Victor Sr. and Irene had provided false testimony during Alex Jr.'s naturalization hearing in 1929.

Perhaps the most striking oversight, however, was the complete omission of the family's residence in Bridgeport in 1915. When listing the cities in which the family had previously lived, the report includes Atlantic City, Dayton, New York, Philadelphia, and Reading—but not Bridgeport. This suggests that the FBI was unaware that the Gondos family spent over a year in Bridgeport, a city known for its pivotal role in the ammunition industry during the First World War. The omission is particularly notable given that Victor and Alex Gondos were imprisoned during that time on suspicion of planning sabotage at the Remington Arms Company. The fact that FBI failed to incorporate these details into its investigation raises serious questions about the comprehensiveness of its inquiry.

The investigation officially concluded in October 1943. The Bureau found no evidence suggesting Victor Gondos Sr.'s disloyalty to the United States or any sympathy for Nazi Germany. Nor were they able to substantiate claims that Alex Gondos was engaged in disseminating enemy propaganda—indeed, they were unable to locate him at all. Based on the results of the investigation, a U.S. Attorney concluded that "the evidence relating to lack of allegiance and lack of attachment to the principles of the Constitution on the part of [the] instant subject does not appear to be sufficient to justify the institution of a denaturalization suit" (FBI 7).

Contents of the family correspondence

The FBI investigation files revealed that the accusations against Victor Gondos Sr. were entirely unfounded. It became evident that no member of the Gondos family was engaged in activities hostile to the United States. To gain deeper insight into their personal views, examining the family's correspondence proves especially valuable. After reviewing the seventy-one letters exchanged between 1936 and 1946, no indication of unpatriotic sentiment or activity toward the United States can be found—on the contrary, the correspondence reveals consistent expressions of loyalty and civic engagement.

The letters primarily address routine family matters such as health and illness, work and business affairs, vacations, travel, plans, daily events, and weather. Political topics are seldom

discussed, but the family's political leanings can be inferred from the few instances in which such matters are mentioned. In a 1936 letter to his wife—who was then in Hungary with their son Victor Jr.—Victor Sr. wrote that he and his son Robert both "will vote of course for Pres. Roosevelt." He further humorously remarked that "Mr. Roosevelt will miss your votes, but we feel that he can afford to miss them." These comments indicate a clear alignment with Roosevelt and his administration, suggesting that the family generally supported the New Deal and its values.

Further discrediting suspicions of Nazi sympathy, Irene Gondos made a sarcastic reference to Hermann Göring in a letter from Budapest, where she had attended the funeral of former Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös[18]. Describing Göring as "the greatest 'aufsehen[19]'," she mockingly noted how he wore all his decorations over his "big belly." While such commentary may not constitute definitive evidence, it reflects a lack of reverence for Nazi figures and ideology.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent entry of the United States into World War II, the war became a recurring subject in their letters. One noteworthy letter, written by Robert a week after Pearl Harbor, expressed concern about their Hungarian heritage. He wrote to his mother that "we can no longer afford the luxury of political discussions with friends, no matter how close they are," likely a reflection of their difficult experiences during the First World War.

Moreover, the letters revealed that the family had invested 21,000 dollars in Victory Bonds, signaling strong support for the American war effort. It is also clear from the family archive that the Gondoses were entirely unaware of the FBI investigation into Victor Sr. during the war. He continued to manage the family business until his retirement in 1953, after which he and his wife relocated to Florida. Zoltan Gondos began working as a design engineer at the Campbell Soup Company in 1944, a position he held until his retirement in 1966. Meanwhile, Victor Gondos Jr. pursued a distinguished career as an archivist and historian, eventually retiring from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., in 1965.

In my thorough research of the Gondos Family correspondence in the past four years, I have read and analyzed all their letters and other private documents. The results showed that Victor Gondos was a loyal American citizen with strong feelings towards his old homeland, Hungary. The analysis of his writings revealed a man who was extremely grateful to America for allowing him the opportunity to become successful enough to help his relatives back in Hungary. He always spoke highly of his adoptive country, and it seems that he constantly supported the political leadership as well, regardless of party affiliation.[20] Based on all available sources, it is safe to assume that Gondos had no intention of committing any harmful acts to the security of the United States.

The investigation into the Gondos family is a compelling case study of how American citizens originating from a minor enemy nation were treated during wartime in the United States. Although Victor Gondos did not personally encounter overt hostility from government authorities, the FBI actively sought evidence to support his denaturalization. The sources suggest

[18] Gyula Gömbös (1886-1936) was Hungary's Prime Minister from 1932 to 1936.
[19] German word, meaning "sight."
[20] Further reading in Hungarian: Rakita, "Bevándorlás."

that a single accusation from a hostile individual was sufficient to initiate denaturalization proceedings, reflecting the intense political and social tensions of the period. The evidence also indicates that no substantiation was ever found to support allegations of espionage or enemy affiliation, leading to the dismissal of the case after two years of investigation. This case study reveals that virtually any citizen of Hungarian descent could have been unknowingly subjected to government scrutiny. It offers valuable insight into the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust that permeated American society during the Second World War.

Conclusions

In conclusion, based on the thorough examination of the case and the available sources, it can be stated with confidence that Victor Gondos Sr. was not a Nazi spy. The question of whether he was an exemplary citizen is more nuanced. The evidence suggests that, aside from a past involvement in an extortion case, he was a law-abiding individual. There is no indication that he acted against the interests of the United States government or its people, nor is there any discernible motive for him to have done so. The FBI investigation was initiated based on an unsubstantiated rumor by an unnamed informant and ultimately yielded no incriminating evidence. The Gondos correspondence also shows a family grateful and loyal to the United States. There are no indications of dissatisfaction with the country’s policies at any period. The overall image of Victor Gondos and his family is supportive of the US against Nazi Germany, and later against the Soviet Union as well.

There appears to be a contradiction between the fact that the investigation into the Gondos family was initiated solely on the basis of rumors and the fact that Victor Gondos and his brother Alex spent several months in prison following allegations of a pro-German agenda in 1915. Notably, although the FBI was aware of the notorious Pirnitzer case from that year, it placed little emphasis on it during the investigation. The earlier case is mentioned only in passing within the FBI files. According to the available sources, it seems the FBI indeed launched the investigation based on a single individual’s unfavorable opinion of Victor Gondos. After two years, the Bureau ultimately dropped the case due to insufficient evidence. The alleged anti-American conspiracy from 1915 was not factored into the inquiry in any significant way.

As the cited secondary literature demonstrated, the Bureau often struggled to distinguish between genuine threats and baseless accusations rooted in personal bias or malicious intent. The case of Victor Gondos Sr. illustrates the flaws in J. Edgar Hoover’s strategy of mobilizing the public as informal “listening posts” for domestic intelligence gathering. As this study has shown, the investigative process was far from meticulous and suffered from numerous inaccuracies and oversights. In contrast, Victor Sr.’s elder brother, Alexander Gondos, presents a different case. It is plausible that he had associations with anti-American circles at some point. Nevertheless, the FBI was unable to produce any concrete evidence of this connection, nor were they able to locate him throughout the investigation.

The extensive and diverse body of source material related to the Gondos family provides fertile ground for further scholarly analysis from multiple perspectives. This paper has explicitly focused on the aspect outlined above, drawing upon selected sources including FBI investigation files, a portion of family correspondence, excerpts from the *Recollections*, and several contemporary newspaper accounts. The present study forms part of a broader, ongoing research project, which seeks to incorporate the full range of available materials. Future research will explore additional dimensions such as mapping the family’s social networks within American

business and political spheres, examining linguistic transitions, analyzing the family’s relationship with the Hungarian-American community, and evaluating the broader value of personal correspondence and memoirs in the study of immigrant experiences.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the EKÖP-24 University Research Fellowship Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the Source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund and the Magyar Állami Eötvös Ösztöndíj (Hungarian Eötvös State Scholarship) of Tempus Public Foundation.

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