

Hardi-Kovács, Gellért. *Géza Soos: The Man Who Tried to Stop the Hungarian Holocaust*. Strängnäs: Gelko Förlag, 2024. 143 pp.

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This biography of Géza Soos represents a first attempt to recover neglected and controversial aspects of his life during the Second World War. The author makes a convincing case for the need for such a book. He shows that in March 1944, after the German army invaded Hungary and undertook to deport Jews to Poland, Soos obtained the highly secret Auschwitz Report. He then arranged a translation, which he passed on to influential Hungarian leaders. Furthermore, Soos, a little-known official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, played a significant role in the resistance to Nazi domination in Hungary, participating in the so-called *Koszorús action*, understood by many to have prevented the deportation of Budapest Jews to Auschwitz. To be sure, the actual nature and impact of that *action* continues to be highly controversial. Nevertheless, the author addresses this controversy head-on and achieves a high degree of clarity. The book represents a step toward resolving the controversy.

Prominent Hungarian historians have questioned the validity of the claims that Koszorús actually had a decisive role in halting the deportations. According to Hardi-Kovács, those historians reject the alleged success of the "Koszorús-action;" that is, the claim that Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc Koszorús commanded his tank division from Esztergom to the capital, drove out the invading *csendőr* (provincial gendarme) battalions, and thus saved the threatened Budapest Jews. The controversy hinges on two questions:

- 1) Was this Koszorús-maneuver carried out to secure Horthy's endangered authority as Hungary's head of state?
or, instead:
- 2) Was the intent of the campaign only to prevent the deportation of Budapest Jews?

The author believes that the precise facts in this case have been neglected because of political considerations. He asserts: "The memory of this action is now entirely captive to current politics and, unfortunately, is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future" (60). In other words, the author contends that certain historians discount the significance of the *Koszorús action* simply because it appears to promote a politically dangerous effort to "rehabilitate" Horthy, who had, after all, allowed deportations in the first place. The author places, however, the focus on Soos as a way to recover significant historical facts. If Hardi-Kovács is correct, it is essential to examine the little-known role Soos played during the controversial *Koszorús action*.

Details about Géza Soos, in fact, justify the suspicion that historical facts about him and Koszorús have been unjustifiably neglected. But to be totally convincing, such a study would need to be much more precise and comprehensive in its documentation of events. As it

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stands, the book appears to have been hurriedly written and lacks the use of all available archival resources. Such resources are available in the Washington National Archives and the Ráday Archives in Budapest. Those detailed records reveal what Soos himself had written about the crucial events of the German occupation in 1944, even before he met Raoul Wallenberg and collaborated with him.

The author provides revealing details concerning Soos, about his leadership in the Calvinist youth movement (SDG, i.e., *Soli Deo Gloria*), along with his subsequent strong support for the work of Raoul Wallenberg. However, unfortunately, the book neglects to cover essential, earlier details that link Soos to the controversial *Koszorús action*. The author refers, for example, to the fact that Soos, as a representative of his youth organization and Hungary's foreign office, attended the famous international conference at Evian in 1938 about the refugee crisis, which, above all, involved the persecuted Jews. In that context, the author neglects to point out that Soos was called upon to meet about this personally with Horthy, who asked him to take note of what he might learn about the persecution of Jews. In light of what happened to the Jews under Horthy's watch, such a consultation could reflect on the nature and significance of his antisemitic views. Whether Soos later met with Horthy about this after the Evian convention is not known. Subsequently, however, Soos often met with Horthy's son, Nicholas Horthy, often referred to as Nicky, undoubtedly sharing insights about the persecution of Jews and efforts to get Hungary out of the war.

That Soos played a crucial role during the war years became quite evident after he acquired a doctorate in law and his subsequent work at Hungary's ministry of foreign affairs. In this position, he became a close associate of the influential Domokos Szent-Iványi, the founder of the secret MFM (Hungarian Independence Movement). But this crucial event occurred not "in the autumn of 1943," as Hardi-Kovács asserts, but earlier, in November 1942, soon after Hungary's tragic decision to enter the war effort on the side of Germany. Szent-Iványi called upon Soos as his first partner in the MFM, followed closely by a secret alliance with *csendőr* Colonel Lajos Kudar, the highest-ranking intelligence officer in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Kudar's highly dangerous, subversive role, his alertness, and his powerful network, including Horthy's office, set the stage for the *Koszorús action*.

The documentation of interviews of Soos by the American Secret Services in Italy in late 1944 and January 1945 provides valuable material for an expanded biography, not included in the present book by Hardi-Kovács. Soos had succeeded in a dramatic escape from Nazi-dominated Hungary, involving the daring theft of a German bomber, the Henkel-111. After landing in Bari, Italy, Soos revealed the secret names that he had been using in Budapest in efforts to elude the SS. He explained, moreover, that he, as a leading member of the MFM, had played a major role in the Hungarian government's efforts to change sides in the war. He had been entrusted, as early as 1943, with making secret contacts in Switzerland with American intelligence chief Allen Dulles and British consular representative and secret agent Elizabeth Wiskemann.

Above all, Soos also revealed details about the crisis facing Horthy and the Jews of Budapest. At the end of June 1944, Horthy had been warned by the U.S., the Vatican, and the king of Sweden to halt the deportations. A few days later, the Jews of Budapest were seriously threatened by the appearance of two provincial *csendőr* battalions, facing the threat of deportation. Soos recalled: "The commander of the battalions, when drunk, declared [to Lajos Kudar] that it was ridiculous for an 86-year-old lunatic king [King of Sweden] to give advice to a 75-year-old nut [Horthy], that they were only fooling themselves if they believed they had

stopped the deportations, and that, if necessary, his two battalions would take away the Jews together with 'their Regent.' Soon after hearing this, Lt. Col. Ferenc Koszorús of the general staff, a member of the MFM, ordered the Hungarian tank combat units at Esztergom to Budapest. . . ."

Soos and his associates in the MFM have elaborated on this crucial event in detail so that there can be no doubt that Kudar passed along this dramatic information to Horthy's office. Upon receiving the information from Kudar, Soos immediately informed military officers of the MFM of the urgent need to alert Koszorús about the need to act. At the same time, Horthy, realizing that he was in great danger, personally ordered the already alerted Koszorús to drive out the *csendőrr* battalions. In other words, Horthy and the Jews were equally informed of the crisis and threatened by those battalions that had come to Budapest. The gendarmes were there ostensibly to participate in a flag ceremony, after having shared a role in the deportations of more than 400,000 Jews from the provinces outside of Budapest. They expected to finish that task for the Germans and Adolf Eichmann. The *Koszorús action* took the Germans totally by surprise, so that Kudar and Soos can be understood to have initiated steps to prevent a coup d'état and the planned deportation. Once the *csendőrr* men were expelled, they never returned. Eichmann, the German chief of deportations in Hungary, felt betrayed and frustrated. He lacked the human resources to carry out the formidable task of deportations from the Hungarian capital.

Synchronicity was an essential feature of the *Koszorús action*, as it simultaneously secured Horthy's position (i.e., escaping from a potential coup d'état) and, at the same time, prevented further deportations. This feature of the events in July 1944 is also confirmed in Soos's later, private papers, preserved in the Ráday collection. They reveal that Soos himself, behind the scenes, in close collaboration with Lajos Kudar, played the key role in facilitating the initial contact with Koszorús. Close attention to such details would contribute to an impactful Soos biography, countering the current tendency to promote a politically motivated interpretation of crucial events in Hungary's history.

Notes

This book has also appeared in Hungarian: Hardi-Kovács Gellért, *Soos Géza, az 1944. évi nemzeti ellenállás hőse*. Budapest: Raoul Wallenberg Alapítvány, 2024. 184 pp. illus.