

Zoltán Béky, The First Hungarian American Bishop

His Journey from Sárospatak and Trenton to Washington, DC

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Abstract: Zoltán Béky (1903–1978) was an important leader in the Hungarian American community for fifty years: pastor and church leader, community activist, author, newspaper editor, elected officer in several U.S.-wide Hungarian American organizations, and world traveler. A distinguished graduate of a Reformed seminary in heavily Protestant northeast Hungary, he emigrated to the United States as a young man but returned to Hungary several times. He was a dedicated servant of his congregation and church and excelled in interconfessional activities, increasingly engaging with national and international organizations. Christian ecumenism provides the central theme in this survey of his remarkable life.

Keywords: *Zoltán Béky; Károly Vincze; Reformed Church; Sárospatak; Trenton, New Jersey; World Council of Churches*

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Sources: The Zoltán Béky Papers in the Hungarian Heritage Center of the American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick, New Jersey, were examined closely and provide the core documentation for this study. The thirty-eight boxes consist of unpublished sermons, worship and lesson plans, correspondence, speeches, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, books, pamphlets, and sound recordings, primarily from Béky's years in America. Hungarian-language newspapers whose clippings Béky preserved may also be found among the Hungarian American newspapers of the Heritage Center that have been digitized and made freely available. Most important among these is the monthly paper of his American church, *Magyar Egyház / Hungarian Church*; the Yale University Libraries provided access to issues of *Magyar Egyház* that were not digitized. Other newspapers represented in the clippings may be found in the commercially available *Arcanum* database or nowhere else. Clippings preserved in the papers will be cited in the parenthetical notes and the list at the end unless the clippings lack title and date, in which case they are cited by



location in the papers. The archives of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, and the Princeton Theological Seminary illuminated key aspects of Béky's career. The *Trentoniana Collection* in the Trenton Public Library was also helpful. All translations from the original Hungarian are my own. I gratefully acknowledge the comments of the anonymous reviewers and of those present at the first version of this paper at the AHEA conference in Pécs, Hungary, on June 21, 2025.

Zoltán Béky was born to a Hungarian Reformed family in the village of Hernádszentandrás, now in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, midway between Miskolc and the Slovak border. He completed nearly all his schooling in Sárospatak, graduating in 1927 *summa cum laude* from its venerable seminary. While studying there, he was elected president of a literary circle, won a prize for an essay, and edited the seminary's journal for four years. A scholarship enabled him to continue his studies in the US at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) (Orosz 1928: 20). He came to the US with the sponsorship of the Free Hungarian Reformed Church (*Független Magyar Református Egyház*, henceforth in this paper Free Church). He received a scholarship to the New Brunswick Theological Seminary for postgraduate study.¹ Graduates of the Sárospatak seminary constituted an important element in the new homeland's Hungarian Reformed milieu. They were distinguished by their sound theological formation, a strong memory of the persecution of Reformed ministers as galley slaves by the Catholic rulers of the Hungarian kingdom, and a continuing attachment to Hungary and to their *alma mater*. Béky's colleague Lajos Nagy was a product of the same seminary and spoke movingly of the so-called "Bodrog-parti Athén" ['Athens on the Bodrog river'] and its many distinguished graduates in American church service (Nagy 1983). Aladár Komjáthy, Béky's later secretary and himself a Princeton graduate, however, counteracted this narrative in noting that many Hungarian ministers came from seminaries in the U.S., primarily those in Bloomfield, New Jersey and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Komjáthy's history of the Hungarian Reformed church in America includes a chapter "in defense of the Bloomfield students" referring to the college in New Jersey that produced more Reformed clergy than any other institution (Komjáthy 1984: 47–54).

Béky encountered a religious environment in America that was more diverse than the one he had left in Hungary. Hungary's population after the Treaty of Trianon was still roughly 60% Catholic, while that of the U.S. had a Protestant majority. Even the Reformed population in the U.S. consisted of churches representing many ethnic and doctrinal traditions. Before the First World War, Hungarian Reformed congregations enjoyed financial support from the mother church in Hungary. The church found itself unable to continue this support after the war. The Reformed Church in Hungary concluded the Tiffin Agreement of 1921 with the Reformed Church in the US, a denomination of German ethnic origin that was now operating primarily in English. Following the Tiffin Agreement, most congregations did join this denomination, and they formed the nucleus of the later Hungarian or Calvin Synod of today's United Church of Christ (UCC). A smaller

¹ "Zoltán Béky," Alphabetical file by name. Archives of the Reformed Church in America at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), New Brunswick and Superintendent's Minutes, Archives of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in the Sage Library of the NBTS, New Brunswick.

number of congregations joined the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches and the Reformed Church in America, all of which operated primarily in English and were of Scottish, English, and Dutch origin respectively.

The Free Church arose from resistance to the Tiffin Agreement. Representatives of congregations in the Midwest and New Jersey that opposed the agreement met in Trenton in 1923 and formalized their new organization the next year at a meeting in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. The new denomination stipulated both its financial independence and its doctrinal orthodoxy, identifying with the Reformed Church in Hungary's adherence to the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. (Komjáthy 1984: 207–245; Béky 1934: 10–12). Rivalry between the Free Church and those Hungarian churches that respected the Tiffin Agreement was expressed in mutual accusations in their respective newspapers, *Magyar Egyház* of the Free Church and the *Amerikai Magyar Reformátusok lapja* [Paper of the American Hungarian Reformed]. The most influential statement of the Free Church position in this controversy was a booklet by founding member György Borshy-Kerekes that appeared in 1930 (Borshy-Kerekes 1930).

It should be stressed that the Free Church had no monopoly on Hungarian-language liturgy: the "Tiffin churches" had many more Hungarian-language congregations in absolute numbers, and English coexisted with Hungarian in both groups' church services and newspapers, especially in later years. A speaker of the Free Church at an interchurch meeting in 1943 insisted, furthermore, that his church was not merely focused on national identity but was doctrinal in inspiration, aiming to preserve "the faith of our fathers." (Orbán 1943: 7).

Béky began his studies in New Brunswick in the fall of 1927.² At the same time, he undertook pastoral assignments for the Free Church in two congregations, at 11th Street in New York City and Cliffside/Shadyside in New Jersey (*Magyar Egyház*, May 1 and August 1, 1927). During his studies at the NBTS, he also served a congregation on North Sixth Street in Philadelphia (*Magyar Egyház*, February 1928), and he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1930 at the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church in downtown Philadelphia.³

Finding a New Home in America

In May 1928, Béky won the most votes among twenty-two candidates to assume leadership of the Magyar Reformed Church in Trenton. This was one of the largest and oldest independent Hungarian churches in the US. Its pastor had resigned from his post earlier in the year due to a financial scandal. Béky assumed office and almost immediately sponsored the congregation's

² Patrick Milas provided scans of Béky's entry in the seminary's Autographic Register and Matriculation Register that confirm he matriculated at the seminary on September 13, 1927, but he found no evidence that Béky completed a degree at the NBTS. This assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

³ The text of his thesis, *The Immortality of the Soul in the Theology of Paul*, and those of other students are in a volume of the seminary's theses for 1930 in the Hungarian Heritage Center, Bethlen Collection. Béky Papers, Box 21.

formal adherence to the Free Church.⁴ Under his leadership, the church paid back its debts, and in 1930 it built an impressive new building that Béky proudly labeled a "palace of culture" that became the site for the congregation's school and other activities.⁵ Béky returned briefly to Hungary in 1930 to marry the daughter of one of his professors in Sárospatak. The pastor and his new family flourished in Trenton.

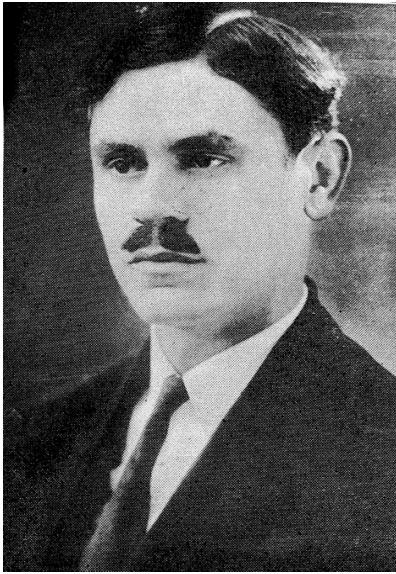


Figure 1: Zoltán Béky ca. 1928. Source: Orosz 1928: 20.

Trenton was an industrial city with a large working-class population of immigrants from Italy, Eastern Europe, and, since World War I, Blacks from the American South. The American Standard company manufactured porcelain sanitary products for the country's bathrooms. At the same time, Roebling's ironworks in Trenton and the neighboring company town of Roebling (whose large Hungarian population founded a congregation that Béky also served for many years) produced the cable for the Brooklyn and George Washington Bridges. Emblematic of Trenton's pride in its industries is the inscription on one of the bridges over the Delaware River, still visible from the trains between New York and Philadelphia that cross the river: *Trenton Makes—the World Takes*. The inscription already reflected wishful thinking when it was installed in 1935: the city's industries had begun a long decline before Béky arrived. The factories' corporate headquarters were now elsewhere. Trenton weathered the unemployment and social unrest of the Depression, managing a mild recovery thanks to New Deal programs and the demands of wartime economy. It experienced renewed decline and civil unrest, accompanied by the postwar flight of many residents to the suburbs and the emergence of the civil rights movement, to which we will return shortly (Cumbler 1989). Somehow, the Free Church of the Hungarian Reformed in Trenton survived.

⁴ Bethlen Collection, 1.1.5: Hungarian Reformed Church in America. 7: Hung. Ref. Church in Trenton, Hungarian Reformed Church (Trenton, N.J.) 1917–1993, Box 3, Minutes Book, pp. 197–215.

⁵ It was renamed the Bishop Zoltán Béky Center on the centennial of the congregation's founding in 1994. (*Magyar Egyház*, June 1994).

Trenton was also a political city: it was New Jersey's state capital, where partisan politics and the concerns of Washington, DC could not be ignored. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 ended large-scale Hungarian emigration to the U.S., setting a quota that disadvantaged Hungarians (Venkovits 2025). It also greatly reduced the bidirectional travel of immigrant populations, leading to the growing realization that Americanization was the future of former immigrants. Several articles in the Hungarian press, both in the U.S. and in Hungary, predicted that Hungarian Americans were likely to assimilate (Fejős 1993: 162 and 243).

The editor of the Trenton newspaper *Függetlenség* [Independence] pessimistically wrote in 1928:

The so-called second generation, the one born and raised here, will not continue our peculiar Hungarian life ... The fate of American Hungarians is sealed with the end of immigration. American Hungarian life, in Trenton and Roebling as well, will vanish. But it is up to us that it should vanish as late as possible and, if it vanishes, at least [survive] in the form of its current institutions (Orosz 1928: 4).

Following this premise, the newspaper's celebratory album about Trenton's Hungarians focused on its institutions: above all, on its fraternal insurance societies and its churches.

It was the task of Reverend Béky to answer this pessimistic challenge. He would preach in Hungarian as well as English, provide for Hungarian lessons in the weekend school to supplement the children's public-school education in English, support a variety of Hungarian activities and groups, and reach out to the growing network of Free Church congregations as one of its emerging leaders. He attained the status of local dean in 1936, and in 1937 became co-editor of the bilingual monthly, *Magyar Egyház*. In 1938, he was one of four Hungarian American pastors (another from his own church, Károly Vincze, and two from the rival Evangelical & Reformed church) who were invited to preach in Hungary and received awards in Budapest in recognition of their service.⁶

While in Hungary, Béky delivered a sermon at the main Reformed church in Budapest, which was broadcast on Hungarian radio: *Uram, akit Te szeretsz beteg* [Lord, the one you love is sick]. Following the Reformed tradition, he began the sermon with a scriptural verse on which he then elaborated: all was not well in Hungary, and not only because of the Treaty of Trianon. Hungarian Americans longed for their homeland, he said, but their churches were more full, and their congregants more generous, than those in Hungary. America was a country built on faith, he stated, and Hungary should follow this example and not succumb to the poison of communism (Béky 1938).

Béky became an American citizen in 1940.⁷ Soon, Hungarian Americans and their former home found themselves at war. In a Mother's Day sermon in 1943, Béky reflected on the horrible

⁶ "Kivonat a dunamelléki református egyházkerület 1938. évi november hó 17. és következő napjain Budapesten tartott közgyűlésének jegyzőkönyvéből" in the Béky Papers, Box 1.

⁷ Unsourced obituary clipping, Béky Papers, Box 30.

destruction of the war: He stated that "*fiaink a halál torkában járnak*" ['our sons are walking in the jaws /literally: throat/ of death'] while consoling them with the mutual love of sons and mothers.⁸ Hungarian Americans strove to refute doubts about their loyalty to the U.S. The wartime issues of *Magyar Egyház* reprinted several English-language patriotic American declarations of the American Hungarian Federation. The pastor of the Hungarian congregation in New Brunswick, András Kósa, encouraged local men who served with the American armed forces to write home about their experiences in the war. The surviving letters are replete with testimony to the soldiers' American patriotism (Kovács 2012). I have found no such record of correspondence with Béky's congregants. The wartime issues of the monthly of the Hungarian American Reformed Federation, *Fraternity-Testvériség*, record the names and portraits of many Hungarian Reformed men of Trenton who served in the war on the American side. Addressing a church meeting in May 1943, Béky estimated more than six hundred sons of his church district were under arms. He declared: "Our loyalty to our God, our faith, and our church follows naturally from our loyalty to our new homeland." ("A Keleti egyházmegye Cartereti gyűlése." 1943)

Amidst the trauma of war, Béky could share one piece of good news with his readers in October 1943:

It is a source of joy and pride for our entire congregation that the lawyer of our church district has become the mayor of the city of Trenton. We believe that this recognition is a distinction not only for our church community, but for all Hungarian Americans. Because András J. Duch is not only a good Reformed person, but a good Hungarian, too.

The new mayor was born in Hungary, and his father was one of the founders of the Trenton congregation and a long-time church elder (Béky 1943). András Duch, Jr. attended school in Trenton, earned a law degree at the University of Pennsylvania, and held appointments in Trenton before serving four years as mayor and then until 1959 as public safety commissioner ("Andrew J. Duch" 1957).

It was as safety commissioner that the former mayor earned a certain notoriety that also cast a shadow on Trenton Hungarians. The war years brought an influx of Black workers into the city, who suffered disproportionately when wartime industries laid off workers in peacetime. The Black population of the city, while still only 11.3% in 1950, had nearly doubled in twenty years (Young 2015: 35). A postwar crime wave caused anxiety and a demand for greater safety among voters. The murder of a white man at the end of January 1948 set off a crisis that caused Duch to take strong measures. He announced in a press conference that police would arrest Blacks who were out at night without good reason (Knepper 2011: 4). In the resulting dragnet, six Black men, later known as the Trenton Six, were arrested and eventually convicted of the crime, with little evidence, after interrogation in which the police reportedly employed drugs and torture. Communists, the NAACP, and the ACLU launched a vigorous defense that led to the reversal of the verdict by the state Supreme Court and a decisive retrial. In December 1949, Duch banned the performance of a play dramatizing the notorious Scottsboro civil rights trial of the 1930s that had been arranged as

⁸ Handwritten sermon in the Béky Papers, Box 23.

part of the defense campaign of the Trenton Six. The ACLU spokesman protested the banning. ("Ban on play assailed" 1949).

Commissioner Duch's electoral campaign in 1951 coincided with the ongoing, widely publicized retrial of the Trenton Six. The secular Hungarian newspaper of Trenton, *Jersey Híradó* [Jersey Herald], lavished praise on "our former and future mayor" during this campaign, asserting that his reelection would do great service "to our entire population" (Lukács 1951). In his column of church news for the same paper, Béky urged congregants to vote for "this outstanding leader, of whom not only we but all Trenton citizens may be proud" (Béky 1951). These statements did *not* mention race or Communism.

The fourteen-member jury in the retrial included the wife of a Hungarian employed by the Roebling ironworks. The jury had trouble reaching agreement, so the verdict was a compromise, with two of the witnesses freed only later. Neither major account of the case mentions the ethnic identity of Duch or the impact of the Trenton Hungarians on the events. The documents and press accounts do not offer explicit evidence of the racial politics of Duch and Béky. Whatever the advocates of the 1924 immigration law had thought about Hungarians, they now clearly saw themselves as "white".

Béky and the Ecumenical Movement

The postwar period was the highwater mark of the Christian ecumenical movement. Representatives of Christian churches, primarily Protestant but also some Orthodox, had performed the groundwork for the future World Council of Churches (WCC), emphasizing their common faith and purpose, on the eve of the war. Its founding act was the first assembly meeting in Amsterdam in 1948. The Toronto Statement, approved by the WCC's Central Committee in 1950, stated in part:

The World Council of Churches is composed of churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.... The Council desires to serve the churches which are its constituent members as an instrument whereby they may bear witness ... It is not a superchurch. It is not the world church. (World Council of Churches 1950)

Member churches retained their own self-governance and identity.

Hungarian Christians in the diaspora may have had half an eye on the Council, but they were watching more closely the Communist takeover in Hungary. So were other American Christians, especially on the political right. The strongest voice of rightist American Protestants was a New Jersey Presbyterian named Carl McIntire, who also attracted the attention of Hungarian Americans. McIntire first organized the American Council of Christian Churches in opposition to the National Council of Churches of Christ. He created the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) to counteract the influence of the leading ecumenical organizations that adhered to the social gospel and were reaching out to the Christian churches under communist rule. In McIntire's words, it was time for a "spiritual cold war" (Ruotsila 2016: 105–12). Béky's ecclesiastical superior during the immediate postwar years, Archdeacon Károly Vincze, attended

the ICCC meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in August 1950. He wrote to McIntire afterward that "the spirit of Geneva is intact in me."⁹ Béky, one of the two deans of the Free Church, represented Vincze and his church at ICCC gatherings in South America, Scotland, and the Holy Land in 1951–52.¹⁰

Vincze promised McIntire that the Free Church would formally adhere to the ICCC at a meeting in October 1951. However, he expected the decision would not be unanimous.¹¹ He passed away in February 1954, and Béky was elected to succeed him as leader of the Free Church, while continuing as Trenton pastor. Anticommunism was not controversial in the Free Church. McIntire's extremism and his attacks on mainstream Protestant participation in the World Council of Churches aroused opposition within the Free Church leadership. In July 1954 in Trenton, the General Assembly of the Free Church voted to apply for membership in the National Council of Churches. This vote reflected dislike for McIntire that needed to overcome Béky's friendly relationship with him. Two of Béky's subordinates approached officers of the National Council while attending the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, in the summer of 1954. But the National Council only approved membership for the Free Church by a decision of the Council's General Assembly in December 1957.¹²

The small membership of the Free Church, about 8,000, was one reason for the National Council's hesitation. Another was the opposition of the church to which most Hungarian Reformed belonged, the Evangelical and Reformed Church (after a merger with the Congregational Church it became the United Church of Christ in 1957), to grant its consent. Its President, James E. Wagner, wrote the National Council in March 1955 that he was satisfied the current Free Church leadership was more favorable to ecumenism than had been Archdean Vincze.¹³ Still, the Council hesitated. Two years later Béky wrote to Wagner to address what he described as Wagner's misunderstanding of his intentions: "We do not wish to be "an exclusive cultural and linguistic group," and "English speaking worshipers are outnumbering the Hungarian" in his church."¹⁴ Even after the decision by the National Council, Wagner declared his abstention when the WCC's Central Committee voted at its meeting in August 1958 to approve the application of Béky's church for membership in the national body (World Council of Churches 1958: 59-60). The WCC's Secretary General informed the committee that its meeting in Hungary in the summer of 1956 had decided to delay a vote because the Free Church was not yet a member of the National Council. The minutes of the July 1956 meeting, with its large Hungarian attendance, do not mention the Free Church application (World Council of Churches 1956: 50–51). Three months earlier, Béky was promised an honorary

⁹ Vincze to McIntire, October 19, 1950, in the Princeton Theological Seminary. Wright Library, Special Collections. Carl McIntire Collection, Box 70, folder 17: Free Magyar Reformed Church.

¹⁰ Béky's journal for his travels is in the volume marked "Ledger" in Box 16 of the Béky Papers.

¹¹ Vincze to McIntire, September 3, 1951, in Carl McIntire Collection, Box 70, folder 17.

¹² The application and related documentation are in Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia. National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, Assistant General Secretary for Executive Operations. NCC RG 12, Box 1, Folder 34. Thanks to Jennifer Barr, Reference and Outreach Archivist, for supplying a copy of this material.

¹³ Loc. cit.

¹⁴ Béky to Wagner, March 3, 1957, in Béky Papers Box 4.

doctorate at McIntire's bible college (it is unclear if he accepted it) and invited for an interview on McIntire's radio program.¹⁵

The Hungarian Revolution fell in the middle of the protracted application process. Béky took a role in the reception of the refugees arriving at Camp Kilmer as deputy chairman of the New Jersey governor's committee for Hungarian refugee relief and was a dominant figure in a local Trenton committee. He called upon the people of his city to provide homes and jobs for at least 2,000 refugees, and it appears this goal was achieved ("Hungarians" 1979). Béky insisted that as many as possible of the refugees be settled among New Jersey Hungarians, and he objected to their being settled with co-religionists who did not speak Hungarian. After talking to seven relief agencies, he expressed satisfaction that they agreed to give more attention to language.¹⁶ Béky reported to the Free Church assembly in July 1957:

For us, who are loyal citizens of our new homeland [,] ... it is painful. and insults our holiest self-awareness that our new homeland's leaders refrained from doing for millions of innocent Hungarians what they did for other nations.... The lords of communism seek to establish a satanical world rule...It is impossible to negotiate with communists (Béky 1957: 3–4).

He was distancing himself from the organizations led by McIntire but would not be outdone in his rhetoric about Hungary's oppressors.

During his years as dean of the eastern district, Béky had increased the number of its congregations from seven to sixteen (Ábrahám 1954). The twenty-four congregations of the Free Church in 1958 supported a constitutional reform that took effect in February, changing its name to Hungarian Reformed Church in America (HRCA) and elevating Béky to bishop. Béky added five more congregations to the HRCA during his years as bishop.

In May 1959, Béky enrolled in a correspondence course with the Midwestern Graduate Bible School. He wrote to the director that, as bishop of his church, "it is a great necessity for me to use the Doctor's title." At the expense of 154 dollars (the price reflected a 10% discount if he paid in advance) and several weeks' hard work, he achieved his goal.¹⁷ A year later, Dr. Béky was one of the contributors to a collection of ecumenical sermons of National Council members. He drew on what Psalm 95 said about the hand of God in man's affairs, quoting in conclusion from his acceptance speech to the National Council:

We wish to assure you that with our abilities and efforts we will fully cooperate with you. and do everything within our power to promote your great ecumenical aims, help to achieve a larger and deeper oneness—in faith and doctrine—of all the Christian churches throughout the world (Béky 1960: 18–19).

¹⁵ Béky to McIntire, April 17, 1956, in Béky Papers, Box 2.

¹⁶ "End seen to row over refugees." 1956. Unsourced newspaper clipping, Béky Papers Box 28.

¹⁷ Correspondence of Béky with D. G. Oliver, May–August 1959, in Béky Papers, Box 2.

Like many Hungarian American Protestants, Béky deplored the division of his people into multiple denominations. He participated in several fruitless reunification efforts, the last of which ended in 1962. Personal and organizational power, property, rival press organs, and ultimately church doctrine caused these efforts to fail. Béky had an orthodox understanding of Hungarian Reformed theology. He told those assembled in New York in 1961 that their church was doctrinally based (*hitvallásos*):

It is possible to deny predestination, the virgin birth, inspiration, the resurrection of the body, the divinity of Christ the Son from the pulpit of some American denominations; from the pulpits of the American Hungarian Reformed Church these articles of doctrine may not be denied (Béky 1961: 7–8).¹⁸

This stance contrasted with the more liberal theology of many mainstream American Protestant churches. Béky insisted upon what Catholics call *the real presence*: “the holiness of the Lord’s Supper consists in its being Christ’s true body and blood”¹⁹ (Béky 1961: 9).

Béky reported as bishop to a church assembly in New York in 1961 that, in light of recent events in Hungary and Cuba, the leaders of the Christian world must be alerted that “communism is here on America’s threshold” and “one cannot negotiate with satanic communism.” Béky justified having brought his church into the World Council of Churches (against the perception that the organization was soft on communism) by stating that his participation would enable him to alert the world to the crimes and dangers of communism (Béky 1961: 3). In the summer of 1961, Béky and his secretary, Aladár Komjáthy, met with an officer of the Free Europe Committee, Inc., which we now know was financed by the CIA. He accepted a payment of 2000 dollars for travel expenses to the New Delhi assembly of the WCC and was asked to submit a report on his experiences.²⁰ It is not clear whether he submitted the report (the records of the Free Europe Committee are dispersed and not well organized). Béky’s papers include two unsigned, undated reports that he may have authored and that tell of his encounters with East European delegates in New Delhi and at another meeting in 1964.²¹ He spoke at the New Delhi assembly in November 1961 about the proposed admission of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Soviet Union to this world body, announcing his intention to abstain (World Council of Churches 1962: 67). He was the only Hungarian bishop to take this position, in contrast to his colleagues from Communist Hungary. Elsewhere, Béky spoke out for the liberation of countries from colonial occupation around the world, including in the Soviet bloc (Béky 1962: 3–4; Komjáthy 1962: 10).

¹⁸ In the original Hungarian: “Eleve elrendelést, szüztől születést, inspirációt, test szerint való feltámadást, Krisztus Istenfiúságát lehet tagadni néhány amerikai felekezet szöszékéről: Az Amerikai Magyar Református Egyház szöszékeiről tagadni nem lehet.”

¹⁹ “Nem emlékezés és a közös emberi sors humanizmusának a megvallása az Úrvacsora szentsége, hanem Krisztus valóságos teste és vére.”

²⁰ Béky’s correspondence with George A. Truitt of Free World Operations, Free Europe Committee, Inc., August–September 1961, are in the Béky Papers, Box 1.

²¹ These reports are in the Béky Papers, Box 3.



Figure2: Béky delivers his speech in New Delhi, 1961.
Source: *Kaliforniai magyar élet*, January 1, 1962.

While in New Delhi, Béky met Bishop István Szamosközi, a delegate from Hungary. His new acquaintance was a board member of the regime-approved World Federation of Hungarians ("Egy Magyar 'békepap'" 1963).²² He invited Béky to Hungary. Béky declined the invitation but spent some time with Szamosközi during a visit to his ailing mother in Hungary in 1963. Szamosközi traveled to the US and sought to meet as many Americans as possible. The mainstream Hungarian American press considered the visit scandalous. Béky refrained from a formal invitation but found it useful to privately host Szamosközi for three days in Trenton and take him to the anniversary celebration of the Princeton Theological Seminary. Béky reported these interactions in a confidential report to his bishop's council.²³

In his 1961 address already mentioned, Béky expressed particular pride in the establishment of the new congregation in Hollywood, California led by Reverend Dezső Trombitás, a veteran minister who had been ousted from his congregation in Hungary and imprisoned by the communists, emigrated in 1956, and then raised the money to found his church. Trombitás argued in his book *Vagy-vagy!* [Either-Or!] (Trombitás 1967) that double national identity was possible. "The ghetto," he wrote, was the word teenagers used when resisting the language of their immigrant parents who sought to preserve their culture. But Béky did not live in a ghetto: not physically, not religiously, not linguistically, nor ethnically.

²² The clipping in Béky's papers is heavily underlined with red pencil. Béky Papers, Box 20.

²³ "Vázlatos püspöki jelentés" (Püspöki tanács gyűlése) ['A sketch of a bishop's report / Meeting of bishops' council'], Perth Amboy, July 15, 1963. Béky Papers, Box 1.

Washington Calls

Béky served on the governing boards of the Hungarian Reformed Federation and the American Hungarian Federation for many years. The first of these, a fraternal insurance organization, elected Béky its president in 1964. We may see his willingness to move to Washington, DC, as an escape from a depressed Trenton neighborhood whose ethnic character had changed, and from a city that would see race riots in April 1968. But he was by now a well-known national figure, and the Federation needed a new leader. The Federation had been founded in 1896 and operated as a non-ecclesiastical organization for the Hungarian Reformed. The Federation sponsored the organization's orphanage, elder home, and archives in Ligonier, PA, published its monthly *Testvériség* [Fraternity], and managed insurance policies for its members. Béky became the editor of *Testvériség* and presided over the Federation's annual meetings.

During his Washington years, Béky was repeatedly invited to deliver the prayer opening a session of Congress. He is said to have distributed communion to five American presidents when he presided over a service in the National Presbyterian Cathedral celebrating the opening of Congress ("Bishop Emeritus Zoltan Beky" 1978).

Béky published a collection of his sermons and addresses in 1975, adopting for its title that of a solemn Hungarian hymn: *You've been bleeding for a long time, poor Hungarian*. His fellow Sárospatak alumnus and successor as bishop of the HRCA, Lajos Nagy, in the foreword called him "the first servant, prophet, and comforter of our American Hungarian life ... [and its] greatest orator" (Béky 1975: 7). The collection provides the reader with the flavor of his oratory. Sermons typically began with a scripture passage and then proceeded, in prophetic voice, to explain its significance for the situation in which his audience found itself. The volume also contains addresses to the annual conventions of the two federations he headed, commemorative speeches, and eulogies.

Béky's final address is an example of how valued he was as a speaker and how seriously he took this role. He was hospitalized with heart trouble on the eve of an address to the Árpád Academy in Cleveland. He took his typewriter with him and finished the address while propped up in his hospital bed. He hoped to deliver it in person, but after the doctor talked him out of doing so, he sent the text to Cleveland. The speaker who delivered the text interrupted it after ten minutes to inform the shocked assemblage that the bishop had passed away ("Béky püspöktől búcsúzunk" 1978).

This article has given relatively little attention to Béky's pastoral service. His papers contain decades of weekly orders of worship, sermons, and more than one hundred reel-to-reel tapes of his sermons and addresses delivered live and on the radio to local stations, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe.

During the last years of Béky's life, his honors included the co-presidency of the American Hungarian Federation, a political organization. In that capacity, he was a leading signatory to protest the U.S. government's proposed return to Hungary of the Holy Crown of Saint Stephen, which did take place in 1978 (Glant 2018). Béky also signed a 1975 declaration of the Federation

that denounced Romanian oppression of the Hungarian minority and its churches. He presented it personally in the offices of the World Council of Churches and the United Nations. The congressman and future New York mayor Ed Koch inserted related documents into the *Congressional Record*. They sent a copy to the bishop with a note: "I think the enclosed may interest you."²⁴ Béky also delivered an address about Romania at the WCC assembly in Nairobi in 1975. He undertook his final international journey in 1977 to South America, on behalf of the American Hungarian Federation, to speak to Hungarian communities and governments about the same burning issue. Clippings about this trip from local Hungarian papers, and even one in Spanish, fill a large folder in his papers.²⁵

Today, the neighborhood of Béky's former church seems to have few Hungarian residents. However, a sign indicating Sunday services in Hungarian and English is still visible in front of the church, and the services are conducted by visiting clergy. Béky returned to his church in 1973 for a well-attended celebration of forty-five years since his arrival in Trenton. According to one of many accounts of the event, Béky became emotional when he spoke from the pulpit he had mounted "ten thousand times" in his lifetime (Éltető 1973). Though he lived his last thirteen years in Washington, DC, he stipulated that his last resting place be Trenton. His small church was filled to overflowing at his funeral service on November 30, 1978. The program consisted of hymns, prayers, and eulogies in Hungarian and English. A scrapbook in the Béky Papers preserves more than thirty newspaper obituaries (most of them from secular papers), eulogies, and letters of condolence, including three from Hungary. There are reflections on Béky's Sárospatak roots and his dedication to ecumenism. Eulogists included his counterpart in the Calvin Synod of the United Church of Christ, Bishop John Butosi, and his successor as Co-President of the American Hungarian Federation, Reverend László Irányi, O.F.M.²⁶

It is difficult to write about Zoltán Béky without resorting to the superlatives his contemporaries employed. He was a brilliant man possessed of tremendous energy and determination, warm and widely admired, but also forceful and ambitious. It is tempting to conclude that, after he left his native country, he never looked back. He made a commitment to Trenton and to his new country but also valued his ties to Hungary. His was a remarkable Hungarian American life.

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²⁵ Béky Papers, Box 2.

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