

Béla Király's Tall Tale that Led to His Decoration as "Righteous" in Yad Vashem

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Abstract: In May 1993, General Béla Király was decorated Righteous among the Nations in Yad Vashem for protecting the lives of a Jewish labor company in the winter of 1943–1944 in the rear of the front in Proskurov, Ukraine. His recognition was based on false testimonies by veteran labor servicemen who were unaware that, during the winter of 1944–1945, Király, then a high-ranking official in the fascist Arrow Cross Ministry of Defense in Kőszeg, failed to respond to the suffering of 5,000 Jewish labor servicemen, of whom 2,500 died.

Keywords: Béla Király, Yad Vashem, World War II Labor Service Company 106/8, Proskurov, Raymond Kaempfer, Arrow Cross

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The first biography of the Hungarian professional military officer, then American scholar, Béla K. Király, written by historian László Eörsi, was published in June 2025 in Budapest, Hungary. The author's aim was to put the controversial life of Király in a positive light, although he also questioned the numerous tall tales Király had written about his life in his various memoirs. László Eörsi wrote in his monograph's "Foreword": "Therefore I must agree with all those who criticize Király because he was at odds with the facts" ['Tehát egyet kell értenem azokkal, akik amiatt kritizálják Királyt, hogy hadilábon állt a ténymegállapításokkal'] (Eörsi 2025: 13).

In his final memoir, published in 2004, Király claimed that, during the winter of 1943–44, while serving as a general staff captain on tour of duty in Proskurov, Ukraine, where he oversaw logistics, he saved the lives of members of the Hungarian army's Jewish labor service company 106/8 stationed there. As the story goes, the men were previously mistreated, but the newly arrived Király treated them, against the rules, as rank-and-file soldiers and was instrumental in having them return from the rear of the front to Hungary when their tour of duty was over (Király 2004: 100–102).



Király's story closely followed the testimonies of four veteran witnesses and his own statement that earned him the Righteous among the Nations decoration in 1993. On March 15, 1993, Béla Király was informed that twelve days earlier "the Special Commission for the Designation of the Righteous decided to confer upon you its highest expression of gratitude: the title of Righteous among the Nations." A copy of the letter was sent to the Israeli microbiologist, Raymond Kaempfer, who had done his best to have Király decorated. Yad Vashem bestowed the decoration on him almost fifty years after Király invented the first story about his saving Jews from harm to advance his goal at the time. The other testimonies, spun from the original story almost fifty years later, were variations on the theme. Király had orchestrated the story in all four of them. It is impossible to discern why the witnesses were willing to provide false testimonies enriched by hard-to-believe details. Perhaps they believed Király's lie that during the Arrow Cross terror he was an anti-fascist in the army and wanted to compensate him for his stance with their testimony. What is surprising is that in February 1993 the members of Yad Vashem's Commission for the Designation of the Righteous were won over by the written false testimonies of the survivors. Within weeks following submission, the commission accepted the hard-to-believe stories. Snippets of the lies made their way into the summary that was published online on Yad Vashem's "Righteous" page following Király's decoration (Yad Vashem, May 10, 1993). The narrative indicates that the members of the commission failed to look at the evidence with a critical eye and made the wrong decision.

Eörsi was also misled. In his monograph, he believes in the veracity of this one out of Király's many false stories that he identifies. He writes, "On the basis of all sources, it is very likely that he saved the labor company" ['Az összes forrás ismeretében igen valószínű, hogy mentette a munkaszolgálatos századot'] (Eörsi 2025: 28). The reexamination of all the testimonies going back to 1945 indicates that they were misleading or false and were written to further the specific momentary goals Király wanted to achieve.

During a period of his long life (1912–2009) Béla Király was a high-ranking professional military officer who, as staff captain during the Second World War, served with distinction the conservative Horthy regime's wartime governments as well as the short-lived fascist dictatorship of Ferenc Szálasi. The military decorations, including the German Iron Cross Second Class, he received during the war are proof of his leadership and bravery as a general staff captain (Eörsi 2025: 303).

After the war, in 1945, when defeated Hungary became a democratic republic, Király volunteered to continue his military career in the new army. In 1946, he was promoted to major, and then lieutenant colonel. During the Stalinist Rákosi dictatorship, he continued to rise in the ranks, and in 1949 he was named colonel and, in 1950, major general (Eörsi 2025: 303). A year later, however, Király was purged and was imprisoned. He was released only in September 1956 during the "thaw," when there was a mildening of oppression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Király's national and international fame came during the short-lived anti-communist Hungarian Revolution of 1956 when he was elected commander of the newly formed National Guard and was also appointed the military commander of Budapest by Prime Minister Imre Nagy. Following the defeat of the revolution by Soviet military intervention, Király sought exile in the United States. At Columbia University he gained a PhD in history and became a professor of military history at

Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. During the seventies, he also established a press specializing in East European history. This author, who became a friend of Király in 1964, was a fellow history professor, an assistant to publication projects, and eventually the executive vice president of Király's Atlantic Research and Publications, Inc.

Following the collapse of state socialism in 1989 and the birth of a democratic republic in Hungary in 1990, Király repatriated and was received as a national hero. He was elected to parliament for four years. His support was sought after by every government, from the right-of-center conservative to the left-of-center socialist. He backed them all and was rewarded for his stance. However, for some intellectuals on the right, led by the writer and far-right politician, István Csurka, his opportunism to serve whoever was in power was unacceptable, especially his servile behavior during the Stalinist communist dictatorship following Hungary's defeat in WWII. It is these critics of Király who brought up in their public attacks the lies Király published in his 1986 memoir, including his contention he first voiced in that publication (Király 1986: 58), that he saved members of a Jewish labor service company in Proskurov, Ukraine (Kubinyi, 1994: 76).

According to Király's memoir, immediately after the war, at the end of June 1945, he decided to continue his military career in the new army that was being organized. As a wartime general staff officer, first he had to prove before the Central Screening Committee of the Ministry of Defense that he committed no war crimes and that he opposed or tried to do something against the fascist Horthy and Szálasi regimes. The committee was headed by General Jenő Róder.

In 1943, Róder had been special commissioner appointed by the Minister of Defense Vilmos Nagybaczoni Nagy (Sept. 24, 1942–June 12, 1943) to see to it that in Hungary the Jewish labor servicemen were treated fairly. His order was issued because, as Nagy recalled in his memoir, "I received daily reports about the brutal treatment" ['A brutális bánásmódról nap nap után kaptam jelentéseket'] (Nagybaczoni Nagy 1986: 167–168). Because of his pro-Jewish activities, following the fascist Arrow Cross takeover, Róder had to hide to escape arrest.

As Király's story went, Róder received him cordially at the Ministry of Defense and advised him to join the Communist Party if he wanted to be cleared. During the conversation, Róder pointed to a fat package of letters that were written by labor service veterans who were in Proskurov. Róder added that "They testify that you created humane conditions for them, protected them and treated them as soldiers. A few attribute their survival to you" ['Azt tanúsítják, hogy emberséges körülményeket teremtettél számukra, óvtad és honvédként kezelted őket. Néhányan neked tulajdonítják életben maradásukat] (Király 1986: 57–58).

Protecting and saving the lives of Jewish labor service men who testified favorably would have fulfilled the committee's stipulation that he opposed a policy of the Horthy regime, which the authorities in 1945 characterized as fascist rather than authoritarian. Király's 1986 story, however, is not backed by the evidence. Instead of many alleged testimonies among his verification documents that were deposited in the military archives, there was only a single testimony signed by two brothers who were in Proskurov in labor service company 106/8, Emil and Mór Adler (Kubinyi 1994: 76). They testified in their home town, Székesfehérvár, that Király had declared during a roll call in Proskurov that the "Jewish labor companies under his command can be assured that he will prevent all abuse or violence, will treat them as soldiers, and will take care of all their

rightful requests and complaints" ['a neki alárendelt zsidó munkás századokat biztosította arról, hogy meg fog akadályozni minden velük szembeni visszaélést, vagy erőszakot, őket, mint honvédeket kezeli és minden jogos kérésüket és panaszukat elintézi']. Their statement concluded that Király kept his word and "the named, therefore, proved his democratic values by deeds" ['Nevezett tehát demokratikus felfogását tettekkkel igazolta']. (Emil and Mór Adler 1945: 1).

The document was typed and dated July 26, 1945. The signatures of the Adlers were validated on the same typewriter. The sameness of the worn typefaces reveals that. The official stamp on the document indicates that it was prepared at the 21st Military Recruiting Command of Székesfehérvár ['Székesfehérvári 21. honvéd kiegészítő parancsnokság'].

The date of the single document proves that there were no Jewish labor service veterans' testimonies in General Röder's possession at the screening office when Király visited a month earlier. It is more likely that for the sake of being cleared for military service, the general advised Király not only to join the Communist Party but also to find Jewish labor veterans in Proskurov who were willing to sign a positive statement drafted by Király. For that task Király found the Adler brothers who signed whatever was typed up and put in front of them to sign at the military headquarters. As to what the Adlers received in return for their assistance, Király did not mention in his memoir.

The text the Adlers signed also indicates that in July 1945 there was no need to declare that they, or others, were saved from death by Király. Király later invented that claim and included it in his 1986 and 2004 memoirs. For being accepted in the new army it was enough for Király to provide a testimony that he demonstrated his "democratic values" in Proskurov and to join the Communist Party, which he did on August 18, 1945 (Eörsi 2025: 52). The low bar was set for Király because the decision makers in the Ministry of Defense were aware that the new army needed reliable and able officers like Király. As Pál Kornis, then Communist Party secretary at the Military Political Department in the ministry, noted in his memoir, Király was a "brilliantly talented and well-accomplished soldier" ['ragyogó képességű, igen képzett katona volt'] (Kornis 1988: 125).

During the last months of 1943 and the first three months of 1944, life became tolerable for labor service company 106/8 in Proskurov, a railway hub and garrison town near the Carpathians and Galicia. For the time being, there was no need for the Jews to fear for their lives. Király arrived there for his tour of duty just before Christmas (Király 2004: 100). A recent publication about Jewish labor servicemen confirmed that, at the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, the situation for the labor servicemen in general was not hopeless and their lives were not in danger (Lénárt and Ádám 2024: 227). Two memoirs written by labor servicemen who were in Proskurov when Király allegedly addressed the Jewish servicemen during a roll call also describe tolerable conditions in Proskurov.

The memoir of István György, who was the same age as Király, was first published in 1945. György was drafted in May 1942, and by mid-June he was on the Russian front with his labor service company. In his book, he describes the horrific and inhumane experiences he went through. György was the only survivor of his retreating company by the time he reached Proskurov in September 1943, following a stop at a military hospital in Darnitsa, where his life was saved by the doctors. He was in Proskurov until early 1944. György writes of no brutal experiences there, though his life was far from perfect. His work was to shovel horse manure, and he complained that

the general staff captain whose name he did not spell out provided less food than was needed and, through various excuses, he delayed the entrainment home (György 2018: 108). Reading György's memoir, one can conclude that Király was not better or worse than the other commanders at the time. He was certainly not the philosemite he was depicted as in the Adlers' testimony.

The other memoir was written by the grand old man of Hungarian journalism, Imre Tatár. It was published in 2020. He and his comrades arrived in Proskurov in November 1943 (Tatár 2020: 145). He not only shoveled horse manure, but for a while his company, 106/8, was housed in a stable. Half of the building was used as a horse hospital. According to Tatár, he and his comrades became infected with horse lice, and to get rid of these parasites, he prepared an ointment as remedy. After the treatment, they rinsed themselves in a shower. Thinking that his readers may not believe that they were able to shower, Tatár added, "it turned out that it was possible" ['Ezek szerint volt erre mód']. (Tatár 2020: 147]. From his Proskurov experience Tatár drew the same conclusion recently noted by the historians Lénárt and Ádám. The changes in the political and military fortunes at the turn of 1943–1944 reflected positively in their treatment. He also noted that the labor servicemen in their unit were not mistreated or humiliated by their commanders. While Tatár was in Proskurov, and even during the evacuation towards the Carpathians in March due to the Red Army's offensive, Tatár never met Király or heard his name mentioned (Tatár 2020: 148, 152]. Had there been a pro-Jewish roll-call speech by Király as was claimed by the Ádlers in their testimony and by Király in his memoirs, surely Tatár would have been aware of Király's activities in Proskurov.

On October 15, 1944, the fascist Arrow Cross executed a coup in Budapest with the support of the German military that had occupied the country since March 19, 1944. They forced the regent, Miklós Horthy, to transfer power to Ferenc Szálasi. Király continued his service in the fascist Ministry of Defense. On December 1, just before the advancing Red Army completely encircled the capital, Szálasi's government withdrew from Budapest to Sopron, and the Ministry of Defense with the general staff moved to the small town of Kőszeg, near the Austrian border of the Third Reich (Cornelius 2011: 349).

At the fascist Ministry of Defense, Király headed the important Policy-Making Section of the Organization Department and frequently met with the Minister of Defense Károly Beregfy. Király was responsible for drafting the ministerial decision that transferred the Labor Service Group Command in the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Total Mobilization and Battle Readiness, which treated the labor servicemen more severely than the Ministry of Defense (Eörsi 2025: 37–38). Király also had to be familiar with Beregfy's circular in which the minister prohibited contact of civilians and troops with Jewish labor servicemen. This edict prevented the brutalized and poorly fed Jews from obtaining extra food (Pelle 2017: 6).

During the Arrow Cross rule between mid-October 1944 and March 1945, the labor servicemen who were shipped to Kőszeg worked mainly on the construction of a useless earthen fortress and trench system that was expected to halt the advancing Red Army (Szita 1989: 91–93). The eventual death toll among the 5,000 men was put at 2,500. Holocaust historian János Pelle commented that during those months, Jews who were taken to the Bergen-Belsen death camp had a better chance for survival than the labor servicemen had in Kőszeg (Pelle 2017: 1, 21 n. 1). If there was a need to help save the life of some of the labor servicemen, it was not in Proskurov, but a year later, in Kőszeg. Király, however, did not come to the aid of anyone. In his memoirs, he

kept mum about the presence and fate of the forced laborers, who formed almost 25 percent of the town's population during the winter of 1944–1945. Instead, he falsely claimed before the Screening Committee and later in his memoirs (Eörsi 2025: 295), that in Kőszeg he organized a resistance cell at the ministry (Király 1986: 30–31, Király 2004: 124).

During the screening by Röder's committee, Király's true role in the fascist Ministry of Defense was disregarded and the testimonies of false witnesses claiming that he was involved in anti-fascist activities were accepted. On December 5, 1945, the Screening Committee passed Király (Eörsi 2025: 50–51, 53). His career in the army took off to new heights due to his Communist Party membership and his close association with the Ministry's Military-Political Department, which Király called a terror organization in 1990. Two months after he was cleared, he was appointed chief of the general staff of the army's First Division (Pastor 2012: 253).

Early in 1950, he oversaw the military parade scheduled for April 4, the fifth anniversary of the liberation of Hungary by the Red Army. For the outstanding job he was doing, he was promoted to major general on March 31 and was charged to command the troops who would march by the reviewing stand on Heroes' Square and would salute, among others, Hungary's Stalinist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi and the Soviet guest, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov. All his success, however, did not prevent his arrest in 1951. The following year, he had his show trial and was sentenced to life in prison (Király 2004: 180).

In preparation for his trial, he was interrogated whether he committed war crimes or anti-democratic acts. Evidence willfully disregarded by the Screening Committee and the Military-Political Department in 1945, because they needed him in the new army, was now used against him. Király's claims of innocence were rejected and the witnesses who were called reconfirmed his misdeeds and added invented details. In his own defense, Király recited the contents of the Adler brothers' false testimony to prove that in 1944 he had protected labor service Jews in Proskurov in accordance with his democratic stance. His interrogators and later the military court took no note of it (Eörsi 2025: 97, 109), probably because they were aware of the falsity of the story. On January 15, 1952, based on various charges, the military court sentenced him to death, but two weeks later, on appeal, the sentence was commuted to life.

In February 1956, three years after the death of the Soviet totalitarian dictator, Iosif Stalin, the ascendant Soviet leader, Nikita Khurshev, denounced Stalin and his so-called "cult of personality." As a result, many of the purged who were imprisoned or in the Gulag regained their freedom. In Soviet satellite Hungary, the Stalinist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi, was forced out of power, and the political inmates of prisons and labor camps were freed there too. On September 7, 1956, Béla Király also regained his freedom. He entered the Central Military Hospital around the tenth of October for a thorough physical and was met by its commander, Colonel György Radó, MD (Széchenyi 2004: 350–351).

Radó, being Jewish, was drafted into the labor service in 1942, and his company was sent to the Russian front. Back in Hungary, he escaped from the labor service in November 1944 and joined the resistance in Budapest (László 1990: 8). While Király was staying in the hospital, Radó discussed with him not only the results of the medical tests but had conversations about his imprisonment and about his efforts to return to military service. Radó had felt "sympathy and

compassion" ['részvét és együttérzés'] towards Király as he talked about his imprisonment and innocence of the charges (Magyar Országos Levéltár 1957: 1–2). During these friendly chats they undoubtedly exchanged stories about their wartime experiences and Király, being made aware of Radó's labor service, spoke about his efforts to protect the Jewish servicemen who testified in 1945 that Király had saved their lives. He must have told Radó the lie of his anti-fascist activities in Kőszeg as well. Radó believed Király's tale, which strengthened Radó's positive opinion about Király (Magyar Országos Levéltár 1957: 6).

On October 22, Király was operated on for hemorrhoids. The revolution broke out the following day, but Király remained in the hospital until the thirtieth. On the thirty-first, he was elected head of the Revolutionary National Guard by the members of the Revolutionary Armed Force Committee. This decision was approved by Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who also appointed him military commander of Budapest. In the meanwhile, Radó was elected chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of his hospital. Following the defeat of the revolution, Király escaped from Hungary and became an illustrious refugee in the United States. Radó remained in Budapest while the communist authorities were restored to full power by the Soviet army. Due to his participation in the revolution, he was suspended from work on January 2, 1957, and was arrested on May 21 (Laczay 1999: 549).

During his interrogation, he was quizzed about Király, whom the authorities planned to sentence in absentia. The interrogation record indicates that Radó's strategy was to describe Király as someone "who stands for the defense of socialism" ['a szocializmus megvédésének alapján áll'] (Magyar Országos Levéltár 1957: 7). Naturally, this type of positive characterization of Király reflected well on the reform communist Radó as well. He demonstrated to his captors that he and Király had the same socialist goals, and that would explain why Radó befriended Király in the hospital. Probably for the same reason, he also brought up Király's positive treatment of the labor servicemen.

Radó informed his interrogator that his friend, the deputy chairman of the Bács County Council, Jenő Varga, who joined the illegal Communist Party in 1932, told him some time ago that during the war he was drafted into a "special" punitive labor service company for being a communist. The company ended up on the Soviet front where the army corps was commanded by General János Kiss, and Király was his chief of staff. Radó clearly wanted to impress his interrogator, as Captain Király was not chief of Kiss's staff, and General Kiss was not in Ukraine. Kiss's name, however, was and is widely recognized in Hungary. As a member of the resistance, he was executed by the Arrow Cross on December 8, 1944.

Radó incorporated in his tale what he obviously heard from Király about his helpful treatment of the men of the Jewish labor service company in Ukraine. In Radó's story, which did not mention Proskurov, it was the punitive labor service company of communists who were treated well and not the Jews: "Király called them together, he addressed them unusually humanely, and from that time on, their treatment changed for the better" ['Király összegyűjtötte őket, szokatlanul emberséges beszédet intézett hozzájuk és attól kezdve a velük való bánásmód – jó irányban – megváltozott'] (Magyar Országos Levéltár 1957: 6).

In 1986 in Safed, Israel, some Hungarian survivors of the Holocaust established the Memorial Museum of Jews Originating from Hungarian-Speaking Areas [A magyar nyelvterületről származó zsidóság múzeuma]. The curators collected a partial list of labor servicemen. On the list Varga, who changed his last name after the war, is listed as Jenő Waldmann, member of labor service company 106/8. There is no mention, however, that Waldmann was in a punitive labor service company. No doubt, Radó knew that his friend was Jewish and that Varga was in a labor service company because of his "race" and not because he was a communist. Being interrogated by the communists, Radó was clearly eager to invent Király's encounter with the labor servicemen in a way that demonstrated Király's sympathies with the communists. Mentioning Varga by his original Jewish-sounding family name would have given away the falsity of Radó's tale.

Significantly, Király did not bring up his alleged good deeds in Proskurov during his exile until his memoir was published in Hungarian in 1986. He kept mum about his story during his seventeen-year teaching career at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York which concluded with his retirement in 1982. Perhaps the presence of Randolph Braham at the same university also influenced Király not to brag about his invented tale of saving Jews in Proskurov. Braham was the doyen of historians writing about the Hungarian Holocaust, and among his many books one bore the title, *The Hungarian Labor Service System, 1939–1945*. It was published in 1977. In the introduction of the monograph, Braham thanked Király for reading the manuscript and "for many valuable suggestions" (Braham 1977: x). It seems that Király, for good reasons, did not suggest to Braham that he should add his name to the other military officers who were mentioned in the text as saviors of Jewish labor servicemen (Braham 1977: 62, 125, n. 32). To a query I sent to Braham about Király's Proskurov story in 2008, he responded, "I have never heard about the incident during my many years of research on the Holocaust in Hungary" (Braham 2008: 1).

When he repatriated to Hungary in 1990, and the attacks from the right started, Király tried to parry them by seeking out Jewish labor service survivors who could back him with testimonies about his Proskurov tale. He found János Fodor, even though he had been doing labor service in nearby Vinnitsa, the headquarters of the 201st Light Infantry Division. Fodor, however, testified that at the time he was officially still a member of labor service company 106/8, stationed in Proskurov. (Yad Vashem, Fodor 1990: 1–6).

In the interview Fodor provided examples of how well he and the nine other labor servicemen from Proskurov were treated in Vinnitsa by Király. He described an episode when he went to complain to Király about the mistreatment of a Jewish labor serviceman working in the area. Király responded by telling Fodor to sit next to him in his armored car and ordered the driver to take him at once to the place where the serviceman was toiling. When Király noticed the Jewish labor serviceman without shoes, half-frozen, working in the snow, he ordered the driver to stop the car, and got out. "Although the frozen chap was covered with lice, we wrapped him in a blanket and put him in the armored car" [*'Az összefagyott gyereket – dacára annak, hogy tele volt tetűvel – pokrócba bugyolálva betettük a páncélkocsiba'*]. According to Fodor, on the order of Király, the first lieutenant who supervised the poor man was demoted on the spot by a military policeman who was taken along in the car (Király 2004: 137 n. 63, Yad Vashem, Fodor: 2–3).

Király's biographer commented on the strange interview, "The uniqueness of the Fodor interview is due to the fact that it was conducted by Béla Király, the interested party" [*'A Fodor-interjú*

sajátossága, hogy az érdekelt Király Béla készítette'] (Eörsi 2025: 437 n. 1563). Eörsi's warning meant that Fodor's story could have been, partly or fully, Király's invention. It was another indication that Király was "at odds with the facts." Fodor's interview was not published, perhaps because three weeks later another survivor's interview was.

The interview with Sándor Farkas was conducted by Sándor Kopácsi in Toronto, Canada. According to the interview, both Farkas and Kopácsi read Király's 1986 memoir beforehand. This type of subjectivity clearly influenced what Farkas had to say. Kopácsi was a close friend of Király. During the 1956 Revolution, Kopácsi was Budapest's chief of police and deputy commander of the National Guard. Farkas's interview was published by Kopácsi in Budapest on November 2, 1990, in the daily *Magyar Hírlap*. The title of the article was "Béla Király in the World War" ['Király Béla a világháborúban']. Kopácsi's introduction mentioned that he published the interview with Farkas, the labor service company veteran who was in Proskurov, because Király's role in the war was questioned in certain papers. This comment was an oblique reference to right-wing publications such as the weekly *Ring*, in which Király's wartime stories were called lies (Pastor 2012: 249). The text of Farkas's interview was as unbelievable as Fodor's. It is highly unlikely that the published article convinced Király's detractors that they were wrong.

Király's chance meeting in the fall of 1991 at the Budapest Opera with an Israeli scholar gave the general an opportunity and hope to finally put to rest the right-wing charges by having the foremost institution of Holocaust history, Yad Vashem, declare him a Righteous among the Nations, the savior of Jews during World War II. In March 1992, Király, back at his American home in Highland Lakes, New Jersey, recounted to me that at a performance he attended at the Budapest Opera the previous October, he met Raymond Kaempfer, a microbiologist and professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His seat was in the same box as Király's. During the intermissions, the two conversed, and Kaempfer told Király that he was not an Israeli native but had been born in the Netherlands in 1940 and was a Holocaust survivor who, as a child, was saved by a Christian couple. Király responded by telling him that he had also saved Jews during the war, the men of a labor service company in Proskurov. According to Király, Kaempfer was thrilled about the story and suggested that Király should submit it along with some testimonies of labor service veterans to Yad Vashem, and he would push for having him decorated as Righteous among the Nations.

Kaempfer was won over by Király's charisma and old-world charm. He believed Király's fib that he was sentenced to death by the Nazis, because, as he wrote, he was "a person sensitized by his own Holocaust experience." He felt that Jews had an obligation toward Király for saving Jews and he considered his duty to repay "the longstanding debt" (Yad Vashem, Kaempfer 2011: 1). He noted, "I resolved to set this right" (Yad Vashem, Kaempfer 2011: 3). "I knew that I just had to nominate Béla Király for recognition by Yad Vashem," he declared at the Righteous ceremony (Yad Vashem, Kaempfer 1993: 1–2). He was sure that he could succeed because he already had nominating experience. His "foster parents" who saved him in the Netherlands received their well-earned decorations through his advocacy.

In his unpublished article, Kaempfer mentions that Király and he followed up their decision by searching for survivors, found them, and "their stories matched perfectly." (Yad Vashem, Kaempfer 2011: 3). Kaempfer's recollection was imprecise, as the testimonies, given at least forty-

six years after the event, did not match perfectly, and all were false. It is also significant that the Adler brothers' equally false testimony from 1945, which was chronologically the closest to the events, was not submitted. Perhaps Király and Kaempfer recognized that it did not meet the requirements of the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous.

By the time Kaempfer and Király started their search for survivors, Fodor's and Farkas's false testimonies, set up as interviews, already existed (Yad Vashem, Farkas 1990: 1–7). It is possible that Farkas was in Proskurov, but his submitted account of how Király helped the labor service company was pure fiction. He claimed that,

we arrived in that town in rags and of course in civilian clothing, and it was General Staff Captain Király who came to inspect our company and ordered to put everybody in uniform. ... In our military uniform we could move more freely. This was the first goal; the other, so this way the Germans were simply unable to catch us and put us to do whatever work there was.

abba a városba akkor érkeztiünk meg, lerongyolódva, persze civil ruhában, és Király vezérkari százados volt [az], aki jött megsejmlélni századunkat és elrendelte, hogy mindenkit egyenruhába öltöztessenek. ... Mi katona egyenruhában szabadabban tudtunk mozogni. Ez volt az egyik cél; a másik az, hogy hát így nem tudtak bennünket a németek egyszerűen csak elkapni és akármilyen munkára beállítani (Yad Vashem, Farkas 1990:1).

This account about the uniforms was later included almost word for word in the short narrative that was put on the internet by the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous. Added to the story by the commission was that "Béla Király broke the law by giving new uniforms to Jews under his command" and the Jews "in the labor unit later testified that Király's policies saved their lives" (Yad Vashem 1993: "Righteous"). It was Király who, in his 1986 memoir, claimed for the first time in print that the Jewish labor servicemen had testified that he saved them. The survivors, taking the cue from Király, repeated the lie. According to the commission's rules and definition, the Righteous were those "who risked their lives to save Jews" (Yad Vashem. "The Designation"). Because in the commission's summary mention was made that Király saved the lives of Jews by breaking military law, a step that could lead to court-martial and a death sentence, he qualified for the recognition of being Righteous.

Since March 1942, however, Jewish labor servicemen in the army were prohibited from wearing uniforms (Braham 1977: 23). Király, therefore, could not have given an order to suit up 200 men when that went against military rules. Such an order could not have been carried out for another practical reason as well. At that time, the Hungarian army was in full retreat in Ukraine, and there were calamitous shortages in supplies, including uniforms. Moreover, since August 1941, the Jewish laborers had to wear the humiliating yellow armband when they were still in uniform. After 1942, they had to wear it over their civilian outfits. Had they been given uniforms in Proskurov, the yellow armband would have been a telltale sign leading to severe punishment for not only Király, who allegedly disregarded the rules, but also for the labor servicemen, who were prohibited from wearing military uniforms. Furthermore, contrary to Farkas's story, it was Captain Király who arrived in Proskurov at a time when company 106/8 was already on location.

Apparently Király was aware of Farkas's lie about the uniforms, as in his statement of January 26, 1993, sent to Kaempfer at Hebrew University and through him to the Yad Vashem commission, the story changed and became even more convoluted. In his presentation, under the title "Béla K. Király and Jewish Forced Laborers," he changed the story by claiming that the labor servicemen were issued military overcoats:

I could not abolish the obligation to wear the yellow band, but I issued military overcoats for all of them and ordered that the yellow band should be fixed to the jacket, so as whenever they left the building the military overcoat covered it. I ordered them also to wear the Army badges at their hat so as from that time on Jewish laborers seemed like regular members of the Hungarian Army (Yad Vashem, Király 1993: 2).

Király's revision of Farkas's story, however, negated Yad Vashem's requirement for being nominated Righteous because, in essence, he admitted that he was not willing to risk his life for the sake of Jews. He acknowledged that he respected the humiliating April 1941 government decree that Jewish labor servicemen in the army must wear the yellow armband, and he aimed to break no rules by handing out the overcoats instead of uniforms. Taken together, his story, was just as unbelievable as Farkas's. After all, below the hemline of the overcoat, searching eyes could notice civilian pants and worn hiking boots or shoes that the Jews wore instead of army-issued boots. And where could he find overcoats for two hundred Jews amid shortages? Apparently, the commission did not find it suspicious that the stories of Farkas and Király diverged. In fact, the commission selected another false claim from Király's statement. The online summary adopted Király's wrong terminology for military caps as hats: "He issued them hats bearing the symbol of the Hungarian army..." Farkas's false story about the uniforms, however, remained in Yad Vashem's narrative.

It is surprising that the veracity of Király's statement was accepted as proof for his own alleged heroism by Yad Vashem. Király added to his story the presence of SS troops that is missing from the testimonies of the four survivors. Király also claimed that the building that housed the company had no heating, had broken windows in the cold winter, and the layers of straw on which the men slept were thin and dirty. Upon his orders, everything was fixed, even the showers (Yad Vashem, Király 1993: 2). According to Tatár's memoir, however, the showers were working just fine. Moreover, he was able to go to the local market to buy bacon, which he steamed on the iron stove and then put in the window to cool. His culinary efforts indicate that there was heating and no window was broken (Tatár 2020: 147). Király concluded his statement by boasting that his deed was unusual and heroic: "My actions affected approximately 200 Jewish laborers; it was not a nationwide movement" (Yad Vashem, Király 1993: 2). Király was so pleased with Yad Vashem's uncritical reception of his tale that he incorporated it in his 2004 memoir.

While the testimonies of Fodor and Farkas were interviews conducted in 1989–1990 to defend Király from his Hungarian detractors, the other two were prepared in 1993, expressly for the Yad Vashem Commission for the Designation of the Righteous. Király was able to call on another labor service veteran who, however, did not identify himself as a member of 106/8 company. The one-page testimony of Andor Berger, who also changed his last name after the war (to Bálint), was dated January 27, 1993. In his vaguely written statement, he wrote that he was in the unit [alakulat],

and not company [század] that was called together by Király, who stated that "he will protect us, and indeed he treated us as human beings and as Hungarian soldiers and provided us with everything that was due to a soldier" ['védelmébe vesz minket, valóban emberként és magyar katonaként kezelt minket, megadva mindazt, ami katonának járt'] (Yad Vashem, Bálint 1993: 1). Bálint's declaration sounded as if he was instructed to include the familiar lines.

Bálint spiced up his story with an episode that allegedly involved Király. The obvious assumption was that his tale would strengthen Király's position in the eyes of members of the Yad Vashem commission as a man who treated Jews humanely. According to Bálint, during one of his furloughs, for which he provided no date, he was in Budapest and met Captain Király there. He complained to him that his leave was too short for taking care of his affairs. Király responded by extending his leave by two weeks. Király, however, had no authority to adjust furloughs for Jewish labor servicemen who, after the German occupation of Hungary, were not given leaves by the army. Bálint concluded his letter with the familiar claim that first appeared in Király's 1986 memoir, "He saved my life and the life of my comrades in misfortune" ['ő mentette meg a magam és sorstársaim életét'] (Király file 1993: 37).

Apparently, Király found the Bálint testimony insufficiently detailed, and on February 4, 1993, a three-page revised testimony for Yad Vashem followed. In this one, Bálint again avoided declaring that he was in Proskurov with company 106/8. Instead, he started his letter with a generalization. He termed his narrative as a description about Király's relations to labor servicemen in 1943–1944 who were attached to the Hungarian army corps in Ukraine (Yad Vashem, Bálint, 02/1993: 1). Yet, in the rest of the testimony Bálint incorporated some of the claims that Király included a few days earlier in his January 28, 1993, statement that centered on Proskurov. Thus, Bálint mentioned the unheated quarters, the broken windows, the lack of showers, and how all these problems were resolved under Király's command. Also included was Király's tale about the military coats and badge for the army caps. In this second testimony, Bálint's furlough happened during the spring of 1944 (Yad Vashem, Bálint 02/1993: 3).

A short passage in a sociographical essay that was published in 1991 in the *Yearbook 1985–1991* of the Jewish Theological Seminary of Budapest further complicates Bálint's three-page testimony. The article has no references or bibliography. In it the author, Zsigmond Karacs, refers to an earlier Bálint testimony that may have been collected by Király in 1990 as another answer to his detractors. This testimony, as summarized by Karacs, places Bálint's labor service company not in Proskurov, but in Stanislau, Galicia (Ivano-Frankivsk). It was at that town that the infantry corps' supervisor of the labor servicemen, Captain Király, called together Berger's (Bálint's) company. He told the men to pull their two-week service pay together, buy carts and horses, put their belongings and their sick on the carts, and head for Hungary. They followed Király's directive and consequently "they could thank him that the entire company arrived home from Stanislau to Körösmező" ['Neki köszönheték, hogy a század teljes létszámban hazajött Sztanislauból Körösmezőre'] (Karacs 1991: 174).

In this secondhand Bálint testimony, it is important to note that his labor service company was still in Körösmező (Yasinya) in mid-May. This fact indicates that his was not company 106/8 from Proskurov. According to Király that company was sent to Munkács (Mukachevo) for demobilization before March when the Red Army counteroffensive began (Király 2004: 102). The

labor serviceman from 106/8 company, István György, also arrived in Budapest at the end of February, only to be called up again on May 21, 1944 (György 2018: 211–212, 13).

In his second testimony he sent to Yad Vashem, Bálint claimed that he was on furlough in Budapest during the spring when he met Király, who extended his leave by two weeks. In Karacs's article, the date was more accurate. It was in mid-May that Berger (Bálint) and his comrades went to Budapest from Körösmező, not on a furlough, but on service-related business. Since Jewish labor servicemen were not allowed to travel on their own, they were escorted by a guard, a staff sergeant. They had a chance meeting at a Budapest railway station with Király, who extended their travel warrant by two weeks (Karacs 1991: 74–75). The differences of the two testimonies are significant; moreover, the passage also proves that Bálint was never in Proskurov, was not a member of 106/8 company, and therefore he provided false testimony in his letters to Yad Vashem. Though the Karacs description did not reflect anything out of the ordinary in Király's action that would justify a decoration from Yad Vashem, Király nevertheless saw the article's passage as further proof of his own humanity toward Jews. He translated Karacs's passage and sent it with the Hungarian original to the Yad Vashem commission (Yad Vashem, Karacs 1991: 174). The inconsistencies in the three Bálint testimonies failed to generate suspicion among the members of the commission.

On July 13, 1990, following the collapse of state socialism, Árpád Göncz promoted several former military officers who took part in the 1956 revolution in the presence of Prime Minister József Antall, then interim head of state (Rácz 1990: 4). Among the promoted were Béla Király and György Radó. At the Army Officers Club where the celebration took place, the two met and renewed their old friendship. There is no doubt that Radó, who was sentenced to twelve years in prison in 1957 and spent four years there before he was amnestied, did talk to Király about his arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment. Radó also told his friend that the interrogator had questions about him, and he told the interrogator how his friend protected the labor servicemen at the Soviet front.

Thus, when it was time to recruit witnesses for Yad Vashem, Király asked Radó to repeat the same story he had told his interrogator thirty-four years earlier. Radó obliged. However, in his testimony dated January 20, 1993, he made some key changes about his late friend, so that the revised story would have a positive impact in Yad Vashem.

Radó started his written testimony by stating that he was conveying the story he heard in 1945 from the late Jenő Varga (Waldmann), an acquaintance. Varga was born in 1913 and died in 1986 (MyHeritage). In 1957, Radó identified Varga not as an acquaintance but a friend who at the time of his arrest had an important position as deputy chairman of a county council. Back then he was keen to demonstrate to his interrogator that he had an influential friend in the communist establishment. For the Yad Vashem commission this information was immaterial, so his friend was demoted to acquaintance. While under arrest in 1957, he kept mum about Varga's Jewish background. In 1993, however, he saw it advantageous for Király's candidacy to stress that Varga was Jewish.

Just as in 1957, Radó also mentioned that even before the war started, Varga was drafted into a punitive labor service company that consisted of political prisoner. However, this time the stated reason was not that Varga was an illegal Communist Party member but rather that he was a Zionist. This change in Varga's background from being a communist to a Zionist was also made to impress

the Yad Vashem commission. Radó obviously counted on the naiveté of the members of the commission, who had no knowledge that Zionists were not considered enemies of the Horthy regime, mainly because the regime wanted Jews to leave Hungary and emigrate to Palestine. Just as in his original confession, Radó repeated the invented story that one day the punitive labor service company was transferred to another army corps whose chief of staff was Staff Captain Béla Király, and this commander radically improved the treatment of the labor servicemen.

In addition to the changes Radó made in his 1993 draft, an old mistake remained in the narrative. Király was not the chief of staff of an army corps. Ironically, Jenő Waldmann is listed only in the Israeli database only as a member of Jewish labor company 106/8. This places him in Proskurov at the time, a fact that Radó, for some reason, failed to mention in his story. For Radó, Varga was simply in Ukraine. The rest of Radó's testimony was the same as he told his interrogator in 1957. This secondhand testimony of Radó, based on hearsay and spruced up with lies, was also accepted by the commission.

Upon his return to Budapest from the May 10 ceremony in Jerusalem where he was decorated as Righteous, Király was interviewed by a reporter from Hungary's foremost newspaper, *Népszabadság* [People's Freedom]. In the published interview, Király claimed that before the Yad Vashem commission made its decision, the testimonies were first examined by a committee of historians (Gál 1993: 12). This was another lie by Király. The commission's online narrative, full of false claims, could not have been accepted by historians familiar with the history of the Hungarian labor service. Had there been an inquiry, the leading authority on the history of the Hungarian Holocaust and of the Hungarian labor service, Randolph Brahm, would have been consulted for sure, and he would have questioned Király's story.

The commission accepted the last testimony dated Budapest, February 4, 1993, and within a month, at its session of March 3, 1993, it decided to confer the Righteous title on Király. The speed with which the commission made its decision indicates that there was no committee of historians who could have researched Király's past and advised the commission about the veracity of the testimonies, all of which contained misinformation, irrelevant facts, and outright lies. It is more likely that instead of a non-existent historians' committee, it was the influential Raymond Kaempfer who swayed the commission to name Király Righteous among the Nations.

Upon his return from Yad Vashem, Béla Király justly felt that he had achieved his goal of countering his detractors. With Yad Vashem's stamp of approval as a wartime savior of Jews, he was ready to remount his attack and sue for slander his right-wing critics who questioned his lies in Csurka's journal, *Magyar Fórum* [Hungarian Forum]. In his *Népszabadság* interview the reporter noted that "Béla Király, returning home from Jerusalem, started dealing with his legal case again" ['Király Béla hazatérve Jeruzsálemből, újra peres ügyével kezdett foglalatzkodni'] (Gál 1993: 12).

After the war, Béla Király came to fashion himself as a protector of Hungarian Jewish labor servicemen of Company 106/8 in Proskurov, Ukraine. His endeavor was based on false testimonies. The first of these testimonies, delivered in 1945, enabled him to join the new democratic army as a high-ranking officer, even though he held a leading position in the fascist Arrow Cross Ministry of Defense during the last months of the war. During the 1956 revolution, he gained national and international fame as the commander of the revolutionary National Guard.

For seventeen years in his exile in the United States, he was a popular professor of military history retiring at the age of seventy in 1982. Perhaps the need to seek new recognition in his retirement led him, in his 1986 memoir, to revive the myth of being a defender of Jewish labor servicemen. This time, he added that he saved some of them from certain death. When he repatriated to Hungary in 1990, his claim was questioned by right-wing detractors. To defend himself, Király solicited false testimonies of four survivors to hoodwink even the members of the Commission for Designation of the Righteous in Yad Vashem. They awarded him the title Righteous among the Nations in 1993. His unearned recognition brought him success in his court fight against those who, as this paper demonstrates, were correct in calling him a liar.

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