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## THE POLICY OF THE COMMUNIST STATES TOWARDS THE FREE CHURCHES AFTER 1945 IN HUNGARY WITH SPECIAL REGARD TO THE METHODIST CHURCH<sup>28</sup>

by Judit Lakatos

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It is a well-known fact, that after 1945 the history of the Western and East-Central European countries developed in different directions. Though the cold war opposition did not make Eastern and Western Methodist churches enemies, their relationships were broken off. Their lives were influenced by different factors. Between the two world wars there was a fruitful cooperation between the Western/American and the Central and Eastern European churches. The mission was financially supported, pastors and deaconesses came to the new congregations. The theological seminary in Frankfurt trained pastors for decades, providing a theological unity, a common view as well. The churches were living inside the framework of the Methodist Church Discipline and carried on its heritage. The war and the change in international politics cut these natural connections and they could be restored very slowly only from the 1960s.

The 40 years during which East European churches suffered the pressure of communist regimes have left marks visible even today, have caused much misery and deformities in Hungary and in other countries. Getting acquainted with this period that is often compared to the forty-year wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness, has required a lot of energy from historians in the past twenty years. Many valuable studies have been prepared – especially about the history of big churches – but in several regards we are still at the beginning of this process. The interest of the media in the role which the churches played during the communist regime and especially certain clergy's cooperation with the state security agency has induced the churches to defend themselves and also made historians deal with the issue. Most of the victims and those who victimized them are still among us. The silence of those affected and the destruction of a substantial part of the state security documents make it difficult to see issues clearly. The demand to face the past and the readiness of some churches to cooperate in it may take the sting out of the press' polemic and make it possible for historians to show the history of the past 40 years from many angles and not only through the eyes of the 'agent issue'.

To a great extent the lives of the small and the bigger churches were similar (the bigger churches – though not quite correctly – were referred to as historical churches; this term is used in this essay also). Still, as there is a difference not just in terms of size but also in quality between them, the trials suffered under socialism, the distortions of church life and theological thinking have presented themselves in different ways in each denomination. The Catholic and the Reformed Churches – possessing the largest social and political weight – have received substantially more attention than smaller denomination. The religious situation and the political actions are too complicated even to give a rough picture about the events of the 20 years after the war, therefore I am referring only to those facts definitely needed to present the history of the Methodist Church. More or less similar changes started taking place after 1945 in each of the Eastern European countries, following the same pattern. 'Sovietization' was put into practice through several different

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<sup>28</sup> This essay was presented at the European Methodist Historical Conference in August 2010 in Budapest, Hungary.

means and it was reflected also in church policy. Comparing the church policies of Eastern European countries would be interesting, but this presentation will focus only on Hungary.

### **The Communist State and the Churches**

The life and spirit of every religious community is determined by the social-cultural environment in which it exists and this was especially true for the churches living in the shadow of communist dictatorships. The political pressure and the grasp of the state bureaucracy delimited their spiritual life so much that without knowing these effects we cannot deal with their history. Historically communism was not the first political system with an anticlerical policy. (It is in the nature of dictatorships not to tolerate self-governing organizations; it was so in Nazi Germany as well.) But it was the first to make atheist ideology the main legitimatizing power and among its long-term goals was the elimination of churches and religious ideology. As worded by Nicholas Berdyaev, a Russian philosopher, communism was also a 'spiritual and religious phenomenon'<sup>1</sup> since communist ideology itself became a new religion and Christianity its fiercest enemy which it tried to replace. It did not succeed, neither by force nor by administrative or educational measures even in the Soviet Union. This circumstance confronted the Christian churches with a serious challenge all over Central and Eastern Europe.

The communist system was built upon the Soviet pattern, with the help of Soviet advisors and with the supporting presence of the Soviet army. The new constitutions declared in every country that 'the leading power of society is the workers' Marxist-Leninist party.' It was the essence of the system that the most important decisions in all areas affecting the life of society were made by the privileged Party and were carried out by state organizations. The forced transformation of society was 'legal' and 'lawful' but the democratic process of law-making was liquidated. The 'revolutionary lawfulness' disguised the despotism of the party and was the basis for a lot of unlawfulness.

It is likely, that a unified Soviet directive was not made concerning the churches in Eastern Europe, yet in all countries the Soviet pattern was attempted to be copied. The churches symbolizing the old era, bearing the greatest socio-economic influence were targeted first in 1945 (the Catholic Church in Hungary and Poland, the Orthodox Church in Romania, etc.). But after the peace-treaties and a short period of keeping the appearance of democracy, all the churches became enemies. In all countries (by different names) church councils and offices were set up which took steps against, and controlled the churches with rather more than less violence. In the beginning the aim was the physical destruction of the churches everywhere. After 1953 the political oppression eased slightly (in some places only temporarily) and violence against churches decreased. Limitation became the goal instead of annihilation, in some places even taking advantage of the church to strengthen the communist regime and that opened the door towards cooperation.

### **Changes in Church Policy in Hungary After 1945**

Some scholars say there is one real dividing line in the church policy of the after-war period in Hungary: the period before and after the agreement of the Hungarian government with the Vatican in 1964.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this step of great importance brought changes only in the position of

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<sup>1</sup>István Balás. *A magyar egyházak mozgásteret a proletárdiktatúra idején.* [Elbow-room for the Hungarian Churches During the Proletarian Dictatorship] In: Katalin Mirák, ed. *Háló. Dokumentumok és tanulmányok a Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház és az állambiztonság kapcsolatáról 1945-1989.* (Budapest: Luther Kiadó, 2010), 98.

<sup>2</sup>Margit Balogh, "Egyház és egyházpolitika a Kádár-korszakban," [Church and Church Policy in the Kadar Era] *Eszmélet* 34, 1997, 69.

the Roman Catholic Church. For the Protestant churches a situation acceptable for the communist regime had taken shape already by the early 1950s, when new church leaders ascended to positions being ready to collaborate with the new regime and did not question the existing political system.

The majority of Hungarian society hoped for a democratic change after the war. Some historians also believe there was a real chance for this with the downfall of the former political system and it only failed because of the Cold War. Even they do not deny, however, that Stalin prepared for the Sovietization of Hungary in the long run. Some historians say the future of Hungary was decided upon already when the Soviet army occupied the country. At that time only a few realized that the uninhibited political actions of the communists and the presence of the Soviet troops did not make it possible for Hungary to decide on its own future. The point is that during the short period after the war the communists put up a fight—first disguised then quite openly—against anything and anyone they thought could be an obstacle in the way of setting up the Soviet system and the communist dictatorship. One of their main targets became the churches.

*The Period of Coalition, 1945-1947.* One of the first tasks of the Provisional Government formed in 1945 was to separate the state and the churches. For implementing this democratic principle they passed a law on the freedom of religion and the emancipation of denominations (Law No 33, 1947) which canceled the differentiation between denominations (previously 'accepted', 'recognized', and 'non-recognized' churches), and gave right to all of them to work freely.<sup>3</sup> On the other side the struggle against 'clerical reaction' was started immediately. The aim was to reduce the political-social influence of the Catholic Church to which three quarters of the country's population belonged. The law on redistribution of land pretended to solve the agrarian problems of the country, at the same time it took away the material basis of the historical churches. A struggle against religious political parties and social organizations also started.

In contrast to the 'historical churches' the smaller churches in some respect experienced these years as a liberation. At the end of the war the Hungarian free churches (Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Old Catholics, Salvation Army, etc.) organized a union, which applied to the Provisional Government for the freedom of religion in a memorandum 'Free churches – in a free state'.<sup>4</sup> This request met the point of view of the new democratic parties. The restrictions introduced during the war were abolished, the preachers of the free churches got a pass which gave them freedom to move about in the country, some unrecognized free churches were recognized by the state. The free churches welcomed with sympathy the steps which were intended to destroy the hegemony of the Catholic churches. Obviously, it was due to the fact, that to a great extent, the campaigns against small churches between the two world wars were initiated by the historical churches. Unfortunately they did not recognize that the aim of the communist party was not only to destroy the Catholic Church but all churches. Probably they did not expect their position to get stronger, as the Catholic Church was restricted, as written by some sources.<sup>5</sup> We might think that under the shadow of a new dictatorship an ecumenical unity would be the obvious response, but there had not been such a tradition before the war, and the situation after the war was not favorable for it, either. The division and the rivalry among the churches were beneficial for the anti-church powers.

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<sup>3</sup> Szilvia Köbel, "Vallásfelekezetek elismerése a Kádár-korszakban." [Recognition of Denominations in the Kadar Era] *Jogtudományi Közlöny*, June, 2001, 287.

<sup>4</sup> Jenő Sziget, *A kisebb magyarországi egyházak.* [The Smaller Churches in Hungary] In: *A magyar protestantizmus 1918-1948 Tanulmányok.* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1987) 251.

<sup>5</sup> Szabadegyházak Szövetsége, szekták helyzete. Veres Pál elemzése, 1955. június 7. [Council of Free Churches, Position of Sects, June 7, 1955] Magyar Országos Levéltár MOL [Hungarian State Archive] XIX-A-21-c-142. folder, 6/3, 3.

*The Sovietization, 1947-1949.* In 1947 there was a turn in the policy of the communist state, and an open takeover of control and sovietization began. It also meant an open fight against Christian churches. Church institutions, social organizations and anti-communist church leaders were considered to be enemies. On 4 July, 1946, a decree was issued which dissolved the religious youth, social, and cultural organizations. Many priests who worked with the youth were arrested. A law in 1948 confiscated religious educational and social/health organizations. A decree in 1950 dissolved all religious orders (with exception of three teaching orders). The old church leaders were taken under police surveillance, priests and monks were arrested with a charge of espionage, conspiracy against the new democratic order, or illegal traffic in foreign currency.

In 1948 Cardinal József Mindszenty, who was the symbol of the old regime and the resistance to the communists, was arrested, and in a few days sentenced to life imprisonment. Bishop László Ravasz (Reformed Church) and bishop Lajos Ordass (Lutheran Church) were arrested too. New church leaders were elected, ready to collaborate with the communist regime.

In 1949 the decree on abolishing compulsory religious education in schools was issued, which was the symbolic triumph on religious ideology. In 1949 and 1950 the historical churches signed agreements with the state. They renounced their educational institutions in favor of the state. In return they were given subvention (*congrua*) from the state which was not enough for the maintenance of the churches, but was suitable to control them. The agreements regulated the relationship between the state and the churches until 1989.

*The Rákosi Dictatorship, 1949-1956.* During the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi, 'the beloved leader' of the Hungarian people, the best disciple of Stalin, the years between 1949 and 1953 was the hardest time in the postwar period for the churches, and especially for the Catholic Church. By 1949 all Catholic bishops were in prison (under false accusation), many of the monks and nuns were interned (by administrative decision, without any justification), many of them were tortured. On 1 July, 1950, the Hungarian Labor Party passed a resolution on the struggle against 'clerical reaction', which meant the strengthening of actions against the churches, their control and annihilation.<sup>6</sup> Decree No 20 in 1951 introduced the principle that all church responsibilities can be filled only with prior agreement of the Presidential Council (at that time only in the Catholic Church, the ancient right of Hungarian kings, *ius supremae patronatus* was expropriated by the Communist Party).<sup>7</sup>

Special institutions were organized, to be responsible for fulfilling the aims of church policy. Until 1951 the Ministry of Religion and Education had to carry out the instructions of the government. Then the State Office for Church Affairs was established (Law No 1, 1951) which continued its work with a short pause (from 1956 to 1959) until 1989 as the top organization of church policy.<sup>8</sup> The task of this office was to fulfill the resolutions of the Party, administration of church affairs of different types, and to control them. The office had representatives in every department of the country in the local administration.

Another main tool to control the churches was the ill-famed political policy under the Ministry of Interior named AVO (Class of State Defense in State Policy, 1946), later it became independent by the name ÁVH (Office of State Defense). The task of controlling and disintegration

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<sup>6</sup> Géza Vörös, "Állambiztonság és egyházak." [State Defense and the Churches] *Egyháztörténeti Szemle*, 4, 2009, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> A detailed summary of their work: Szilvia Köbel, „Oszd meg és uralkodj!” *Az állam és az egyházak politikai, jogi és igazgatási kapcsolatai Magyarországon 1945-1989 között.* [Divide and Reign. Political, Legal and Administrative Relations Between the State and the Churches] (Budapest: Rejtjel Kiadó, 2005).

of churches was among the duties of the police from 1946, as part of the struggle against internal reaction.<sup>9</sup> The church leaders were taken under secret police surveillance automatically as 'class enemies'. Often colleagues were forced to report on bishops and pastors. In 1956 the AVH was dissolved, but after the revolution it was reorganized under the Ministry of Interior with previous tasks and staff. After 1956 the best or sometimes the only way to build a career, to travel abroad and get scholarships, was to become an agent of the secret police. In 1989 all the bishops of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches and most of the Catholic bishops were secret agents!<sup>10</sup>

We do not have a clear picture of the cooperation between the political police and the State Office for Church Affairs. They fulfilled the same task, they had close and regular relationship, but one worked with legal methods and the other through secret channels. Recent research showed that until the end of the '60s the main line of church policy was determined by the police, from the early '70s more and more by the State Office of Church Affairs. It meant that the method of oppression and terrorization was changed toward influencing through cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

The position of small churches before 1956 was not a political question, the regime was satisfied with the administrative forms of control. In their case, controlling was hard because many of these small denominations had no formal church leadership and church organization. (The Methodist Church was one of the most organized among them.) One of the main efforts at that time was to make 'real churches' from them, choose leadership, make church discipline, involve them in the Union of Free Churches. Thus the voluntary organization of free churches was transformed to an executive organization of the state office. From 1950 it was named not a union but a council (the Hungarian word '*tanács*' is equivalent with the Russian '*soviet*', which means council, advice). The respected, autonomous leader of the Union, Prof. Ferenc Kiss was removed and replaced by another leader, more loyal to the system (1958).

The administrative control was realized mainly by distributing preacher's passes. These passes were issued by the Union of Free Churches, then by the State Office for Church Affairs and provided free movement within the country. Then passports were changed every year and fewer and fewer people got the right to preach. An official report of the State Office stated that the administrative method did not bring the expected result. The number of free church members declined from 28 thousand to 25 thousand and the number of preachers with passport declined as well, but preachers without passport could freely preach and the office was not able to control them. 'The activity of the sects belonging to the Council of Free Churches is characterized—with the exception of the Baptists—by extreme evangelization, turning inwards, separation and passivity towards social and political questions.'<sup>12</sup>

*The Kadar Era, 1956-1965.* As is well known, the Hungarian revolution in 1956 showed the weaknesses of the Soviet bloc for the first time. The 12 days were a short interlude in the history of the party-state dictatorship; it brought change in the work of the regime, even though it could be felt only a couple of years later. The party-state dictatorship turned milder, gave up open violence and became a paternalistic regime. But the consolidation of Janos Kadar's power was prolonged until 1962. In the time of bloody retaliations, trials, and executions the church policy

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<sup>9</sup> Vörös, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Viktor Attila Soós, Csaba Szabó, László Szigeti eds, *Egyháziüldözés és egyháziüldözők a Kádár-korszakban.* [Persecution and Persecutors of the Churches in the Kadar Era] (Budapest. Szent István Társulat, Luther Kiadó, 2010), 148.

<sup>11</sup> Gábor Tabajdi-Krisztián Ungváry, *Elhallgatott múlt. A pártállam és a belügy. A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956-1990.* [Past Suppressed. The Work of the Secret Police in Hungary 1956-1990.] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet Corvina Kiadó, 2008) 286-287.

<sup>12</sup> MOL, XIX-A-21-c-142 folder, 6/3, 3.

generally did not change. The leaders compromised during the revolution were removed from their offices. Decree No. 22 in 1957 made the state's approval a requirement for filling every church office in the Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed churches and Jewish synagogues. The network of secret agents was expanded in the churches, the movement of peace priests was reorganized.

Church policy in the Kadar era was determined by pragmatic considerations. The main aim remained the annihilation of churches, but their existence was a reality, therefore the state should make use of them, it was necessary to cooperate with them.<sup>13</sup> The party gave some freedom to the churches and used this to show that religious people can also get on in a socialist state. The churches helped to improve the international picture of Hungary abroad, especially with participating in the Christian Peace Conference, helping to take care of the elderly, the disabled and addicted people.

The biggest concession was the agreement with the Vatican in 1964. In the secret clauses the Holy See accepted that the Pope will not fill any church office without the prior approval of the state, which made the Catholic Church an obedient servant of the state. Most of the bishops and all of the archbishops were recruited to the secret police. It was a rare situation in Eastern Europe. In no other country was the Catholic Church so responsive to cooperate with the communist state (in fact it was the church which suffered a lot and was broken long before 1956). The well-known Catholic Historian, Gábor Adriányi wrote: "it was the lowest point in the 1000 year' history of the church".<sup>14</sup>

A big dilemma for the atheist party was how far they could go in cooperation with the churches. The interest of the regime's consolidation required a peaceful coexistence, of course within the boundaries, formed by the state. But they did not give up the struggle against religious ideology, though from the '60s they chose more refined methods to reach their goals. The work with the youth was the main focus<sup>15</sup> (religious students could not become teachers, students in universities had to be members of the communist youth organization, on Christian holidays communist holidays had to be celebrated and so on). It is not incidental that the work with the youth, teaching religion, organization of religious youth camps were prohibited and restricted for the churches to do.

The free churches were taken hardly any notice of at the top level party organizations. They were controlled by the State Office for Church Affairs. In the Kadar era efforts were made to win them for political cooperation, and state officers dealt with the pastors and church leaders, instead of the police. The political regime started a 'conversation' with society, but not a real dialog. They expected everyone to become identified with the program of the Party, get adjusted to and advertize it. The Council of Free Churches was a partner in it. Sándor Palotay became the president of the council in 1961, a strange, dividing person. He knew perfectly the free churches, but had good connection with the Party leaders too. His immoral life, suspicious business affairs were disapproved in the free churches, but it was impossible to remove him. Under his leadership the council changed from a brotherly community to a controlling organization, also dealing with the internal affairs of the churches.

It was a hard question of conscience for the churches: how to approach the offered 'liberty.' Is it possible to cooperate with an atheist regime? Does the church have the right to refuse a relative liberty and give up the fulfillment of its mission? In principle there were many possible ways, but

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<sup>13</sup> Balogh, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Tabajdi, Ungváry, 290.

<sup>15</sup> Party resolution on July 22 1958. Jenő Gergely, "Egyházak, egyházpolitika 1945-1968" [Churches, Church Policy] *História*, 3, 1990, 34.

in practice it was not simple at all to choose one.

To stand up against the communist regime, undertaking even martyrdom, to hold on without opportunism was the way of the few. A symbolic figure of resistance was Cardinal Mindszenty. He was arrested and tortured but he did not resign. Many Catholic priests, monks, nuns were also arrested from early post-war years. The last priest was set free only in 1977!

The way of compromises was widely accepted. The big Protestant churches formed their new theological view already in the early '50s, under different names of 'the theology of the narrow way', 'the theology of diakonia', 'the theology of a serving church'. The main statement of these theories of the church has to serve everywhere, without giving up its ideology (in the struggle for peace, for social justice, against poverty). The Catholic Church formed its ideology later, 'the theology of small steps' (formulated by Cardinal Lékai) proposed the same: to accept the existing regime. Most of the small churches followed this way.

In the '70s and '80s more and more people got tired of opportunism and new intentions appeared: new small communities, basis communities were formed in the Catholic and Protestant churches. There were splits in the free churches (in the Adventist and Methodist churches), in that process the relationship between the state and the churches was crucial. It is hard to decide whether there was a catacomb church in Hungary. Was it possible not to collaborate, not to become martyrs, but live as believers?

### **The Methodist Church After World War II**

The period following the war for both the country and the churches meant years filled with joy over the peace but also a hard way of life. Letters to the superintendent are telling about people chilled to the bone through entire winters because of lack of firewood. In all congregations news about family members who had been taken to the front or became prisoners of war were anxiously awaited. It was a common complaint that public transport was scarcely working, there was no postal service, aid, allowances, and letters were delivered by acquaintances. The depth of post-war crisis is shown by the fact that it was seriously considered to put an end to the existence of the independent Methodist Church and join another free church.<sup>16</sup> Officially, the church had 3,000 members, 12 pastors and preachers. Services were done in 10 circuits, the church possessed 6 church buildings, 10 preaching points, a nursing home, an orphanage and an elderly home in Budakeszi.

On the other hand, the church had suffered serious human and financial losses. The place of worship in Miskolc and one of the church buildings in Budapest were hit by bombs. In Budakeszi, the wooden fence, window-panes and the filing cabinet were used to make fire ('they learned this from the Russians'—a pastor wrote<sup>17</sup>), the building was in bad condition. Some pastors were taken into captivity, some were interned due to their German origin. About the number of military and civil victims of the congregations, we do not have even a rough estimate. Dozens of Jewish families were carried off from the Budapest congregation, only a few of them came back. The Germans left voluntarily at the beginning of the war. Some congregations were broken, because of the deportation of the Germans. The one in Borjád ceased to exist, hardly anyone remained in Kaposszekcső and Györköny. From the most populous congregation, Nyíregyháza, the Slovaks moved in one group to Czechoslovakia under the leadership of pastor József Márkus. From a

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<sup>16</sup> Frigyes Hecker, *A Magyarországi Metodista Egyház története 1945-től napjainkig*. [The History of the Methodist Church in Hungary from 1945 to Our Days] In: Judit Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak. Tanulmányok a Magyarországi Metodista Egyház történetéről*. (Budapest: Magyarországi Metodista Egyház, 2005), 191.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of Artúr Szalós to Jenő Liebstökl, February 28 1946. Magyarországi Metodista Egyház LevéltáraMMEL (Archives of the Methodist Church in Hungary) V. Szalós Artúr iratai.



congregation of 400, only 18 members remained.<sup>18</sup>

The hard financial situation of the country after the war had an impact on the church as well. The devastation and the inflation put the whole economy into a difficult situation. The donations from the congregational members ceased to come in. Foreign donations used to be the financial basis for the Hungarian Methodist mission between the two world wars, and these also stopped arriving in a short time. Clothes, food, sugar still came in for a couple of years but their distribution became more and more difficult. The authorities kept part of the shipments back, the cost of customs clearance was high, the officials in charge had to be bribed.

One of the main results in the post-war period for the Methodist Church was that it became officially recognized by the state on 31 October, 1947. They had struggled for this without success for 20 years between the two wars. Its services now became legitimate and it meant a more favorable position than prior to the war. Protection was hoped for from this acknowledgement and from the newly founded Union of Free Churches. However, it turned out quickly that these expectations were not realistic, the antichurch policy struck all the churches.

The settlement of the legal status was undoubtedly a result due to the political situation, yet the church became more and more estranged from its own Methodist traditions. During the Cold War it was not advantageous to emphasize the connections to the worldwide Methodist church. This statement was deleted from the rules and regulations of the church. A photo proves that Bishop Paul N. Garber could still enter the country early in 1947 but after that no Methodist bishops came to Hungary until 1956. In consequence, the ordination of pastors and the election of the superintendent had to be done without a bishop, contrary to the church discipline. Hungarian pastors did not travel abroad. The distorting effects of being isolated are hard to measure but it did definitely no good to the spirit of the church, to the theological training of pastors.

It was also a deviation from the church discipline that the regular annual conferences were cancelled. The last one was held in Újvidék (Novi Sad) in 1943 on the reannexed territory of the country together with the pastors from the former Yugoslavia. Then because of the difficulties of traveling, the pastors joining the army, and the financial problems the next one was in 1949. (There was probably an annual conference in 1947, during the bishop's visit, but there is no written record of it.) The next one was organized in 1953, then in 1957 and after that the order of yearly meetings was restored at last. It is likely that the role of formal meetings was taken over by informal gatherings (like spiritual retreats, faith conferences), and the superintendent made a decision on his own in numerous issues. There was no money to cover the transport costs of the laity at all. All these led to the strengthening of paternalist traditions.

There is only a short note about the first post-war conference. Superintendent János Tessényi was still in the list of pastors, although he had been abroad for one and a half years by then. (The elderly pastor was asked to spy on the Lutheran bishop, Lajos Ordass but he chose immigration with his wife instead.<sup>19</sup>) At this conference held without the bishop, János Szécsey was elected superintendent by the pastors.

The Hungarian Methodist work was done within the framework of the Mission Conference between the two world wars. It grew into a Provisional Annual Conference in 1940, probably with the congregations of the regions reannexed during the war. From 1949 the church was operating as an Annual Conference and decided upon its own matters. We do not have written documents

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<sup>18</sup> In the course of the Slovak-Hungarian population transfer, the people from Nyíregyháza got to Levice and environs. There they lived as part of the Methodist Church, but joined to the Brethren Church of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>19</sup> István Szépfalusi, ed., *Lajos Ordass, Önéletrajzi írások I.* (Bern: Európai Protestáns Magyar Szabadegyetem, 1985) 243.

about the decision of the General Conference that approved the change. The civil law of the time gave the framework to the activity of the church in this period and the rules and guidelines of the Methodist Church Discipline got farther and farther from the everyday life of the Methodist church.

*The Methodist Church During the Rákosi regime.* The communist take-over put the churches into an extremely difficult situation. The smaller churches were no exception, the anticlerical measures struck them as well. However, due to their small influence on society, their pastors and members did not have to become martyrs, they did not suffer more than other citizens. We know about a case of a house search at the superintendent's (he was accused of foreign currency offence). Tibor Iványi, the pastor in Szolnok was taken into custody because of a petty offence, an unpermitted church program. Some members were imprisoned because they refused to buy Peace-Loan bonds in Nyíregyháza, there must have been lots of harassment by the police. We know only about one case when a pastor was successfully recruited to the political police. Superintendent János Szécsey was watched by his deputy, Dr. Artúr Szalós.<sup>20</sup> It is known that Szalós was compelled to cooperate by beating and torture. After a time, he refused to report and revealed himself to his colleagues. The old and broken pastor left the country in 1956.

Besides losing its foreign relations, the Methodist Church was most seriously impacted by the confiscation of its real estate. The church lost the Budakeszi buildings, together with the sanatorium, 70 % of the building in Budapest (in Felsőerdősor), the pastor's flat in Kispest, the church building in Szolnok. Except for Budakeszi the work of deaconesses also had to cease. The church was informed about all this only through the local authorities. Deaconesses chose a civil job for a living. The work of taking care of the elderly was done by other church institutions still left by the state.

It can hardly be understood from the correspondence of the pastors what they thought of the political changes after 1949. Official statements were always polite, they reflect the obedience to the order and guidance of the Scripture. The church was not seeking martyrdom, but did not bow and scrape to the new leadership either. Superintendent János Szécsey made a comment at several places that he was helped by Calvinist brothers and sisters to understand the humane objectives of the new order and find the proper attitude.<sup>21</sup> The 'theology of the narrow way' found followers also in other free churches.

If we ask the elderly members of our congregations about the years following the war, they tell us of great things, not taking personal tragedies into account. Most congregations recovered from the losses of the war and at times of the big evangelizations and spiritual retreats the church rooms filled up again. According to the evidence of photos, occasions with even a hundred participants were not rare. In Nyíregyháza, Kaposszekcső, Döbrököz, Budapest there were revivals. In Szolnok and Hidas new congregations were founded. Young people came and took over the work from the elderly. The church came to itself again, the pastors – making huge sacrifices – were doing their job among the people. The openness of the church to social issues was marked by its readiness to serve in new areas of mission, such as work among gypsies, first in Miskolc, then in Nyíregyháza and other places.

*The Methodist Church after 1956.* The revolution in 1956 had distracted the life of the church, but it did not have a strong influence in the congregations as there were no participants of the

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<sup>20</sup> Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára [Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security] O-9045 Szécsey János személyi dosszié.

<sup>21</sup> Greeting of the Superintendent János Szécsey, 1953. MMEL I.7. Évi konferencia. 16. doboz.

revolution from the church. 1956 brought changes, because superintendent Szécsey resigned from his office due to his illness. In the summer that year—as a sign of political changes—the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches had its session in Hungary and Methodist Bishop Ferdinand Sigg got permission to enter Hungary. So, there was hope after a long time to have an Annual Conference in the presence of a bishop. Finally, only the pastors could meet the bishop (the laity did not participate at the Annual Conference) and they agreed, that the new superintendent will be Adam Hecker. The election was affirmed by the congregations in an extraordinary way by letters.<sup>22</sup> The new leader of the church was younger, but a man from the former generation, spiritually minded, but more active in social questions, than his predecessor. At the time when the new political regime opened towards the churches, Adam Hecker was a competent leader.

The new superintendent wrote in his report in 1958 that the spiritual life of the church lost some of its intensity in consequence of turning inward. Modesty is appropriate, but even a small church can do something for society, it can pray for the solution of social problems, and it can participate in the peace movement.<sup>23</sup> The principles of cooperation with the state were formed in the State Office of Church Affairs and the Council of Free Churches, and it was not advisable to hold off. Obviously Adam Hecker was loyal to the political power and awaited loyalty from the pastors, not for sympathy to the Communist regime and not for material or other interests. Many people both in big and small churches, felt that cooperation was the precondition for the free work and service of the churches, even within narrow boundaries.

From the early '60s – after the consolidation of the Kadar regime, the amnesty and improvement of the international situation – the Methodist Church could have some breathing room. Packages from abroad arrived again, the bishop could send money to support the salary of the pastors, some pastors could participate in international events with prior permission (mostly to Czechoslovakia and the GDR), a couple of pastors could travel on holiday to Locarno, Switzerland, to the holiday house of the World Council of Churches. The controls loosened, but it was obligatory to give a detailed report on every trip abroad. We do not know whether the secret police took the Methodist pastors under surveillance, but it was a scandal, when Antonia Wladar was elected secretary of Eastern Europe for women's work and the State Office for Church Affairs got to know about this fact, but not from the superintendent's report on international relationships. Adam Hecker had to apologize for a long time.<sup>24</sup>

It was beneficial for the church that the Council of Free Churches organized an Institute for Pastor's Education in 1967. From that time on the theologians received higher qualifications than in the '50s.

In the '60s the order of church meetings was settled. From 1957 on, an Annual Conference was held every year with pastors and lay delegates. Every autumn a meeting and training for pastors was organized, from 1968 a leadership seminar was held every year. Besides the many conferences, camps were organized by the congregations. Since many people participated in these events, the church had to inform the police about them. We know from recollections that outsiders participated and followed these events attentively.

The activities of the congregations were not restricted by the authorities, but the congregations with stronger mission-outreach were kept under surveillance more seriously. Tibor Iványi had many troubles with the authorities in Nyíregyháza, and János Szuhánszki was 'visited'

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<sup>22</sup> Bishop Ferdinand Sigg certified the decision by letter on 29 Jan, 1957. MMEL, VI. Hecker Ádám iratai.

<sup>23</sup> Report of the Superintendent Adam Hecker, MMEL, I.7. Évi konferencia. 17. doboz

<sup>24</sup> Letter of Adam Hecker Ádám to the State Office for Churches. June 19 1971. MMEL I. 19/1. Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal. 61. doboz.

quite often as well. Probably their youth work and Roma ministry caught attention. The construction work for a new church building was cancelled for many years, until finally permission was given to build a pastor's apartment. The apartment was used for church purposes as well, which caused an investigation against the pastor. Some students were expelled from the high school because of their 'mission activities' among Gypsies and because of making religious propaganda. Students of theology received call-up to the army.<sup>25</sup>

The church could live within relatively narrow bounds in the Kádár regime. The superintendent expected a loyal attitude from the pastors but this loyalty was less and less obvious for everyone. Even though in regard to small issues some tried to widen the frames of freer action, but then the smaller or bigger complications had to be settled by the superintendent. Probably the most remarkable issue was the 'typing case'. Since there was no religious publishing in Hungary at the time, religious books and writings spread in free church circles in typed manuscript. Among them also anticommunist documents were found by the authorities. An investigation tried to reveal the connection between churches. The superintendent had to sort things out and settle them.<sup>26</sup> Private copying was controlled more strictly, all copies had to be submitted to the Council of Free Churches as well. Furthermore, the church had requested for decades in vain for permission to publish a Methodist magazine.

The nagging of state offices brought about discontent and people gave voice to their increasing dissatisfaction. On the other hand, Adam Hecker was severely challenged by trying to balance between the pastors and the offices. Probably neither side was fully satisfied with his activity. The State Office of Church Affairs was dissatisfied because of the numerous petty cases and the increasingly opposing voices at leadership seminars and other gatherings. The pastors were troubled by the obedience interpreted as submission. Adam Hecker's sincere, open-hearted character found it hard to bear the burdens of the Superintendent Office. The relationship between the state and the church became a permanent topic at annual conferences and other church meetings. All this, together with generational conflicts and personal debates induced a split in 1974.

A sociologist said the Catholic Church in Hungary in the '60s became a 'church with two railways'; the official church with the clergy and the dissident basic communities of believers and these two coexisted.<sup>27</sup> The Methodist Church was too small to have a 'catacomb church' within it. The pastors and believers lived together in a family-like community and the oppositional group openly disagreed and attacked the superintendent for being loyal to the church authorities. This group was dissatisfied with the superintendent's policy. It consisted not only of lay persons but also of some pastors, and was headed by a charismatic, ambitious young pastor, Tibor Iványi, who pretended to be a superintendent. The intervention into the conflict by officials of the State Office of Church Affairs and Council of Free Churches resulted in the expulsion of the oppositional pastors and theologians from the church. There is no evidence that the authorities had created a scenario for such a resolution,<sup>28</sup> but there was a firm intention to force Iványi to give up criticizing the state and church relationship and give up mission outside the church. The conflict in 1974 was the most clear expression of what the communist regime thought about religious freedom and what type of church activities was acceptable for them.

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<sup>25</sup> Letter of Adam Hecker to the State Office for Church Affairs, April 11, 1968. MMEL I. 19/1. Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal. 61. doboz.

<sup>26</sup> Notice of Adam Hecker on the conversation with Vilmos Lóránt November 18, 1963. MMEL I. 19/1. Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal. 61. doboz.

<sup>27</sup> Margit Balogh cites Miklós Tomka. Ibid. 74.

<sup>28</sup> A similar situation was formed in the Adventist Church where the group of Oszkár Egervári was excluded after an inner conflict. People may think there was a special plan to destroy small churches by making colleagues enemies.

Forming a relationship to communist power was a difficult task for East European churches. In many cases they did not even succeed in finding the ethically right way. Bearing the openly antichurch, violent attitude was almost easier than accepting the hypocritical policy using a friendly voice but inducing the churches to be submissive, servile. In fact the apparent concessions provided a quite narrow ground for the churches. In return the system expected an active support as well as giving up the mission, which was fulfilled in most cases. Even today it is hard to draw the lesson what the church won or lost in these decades.