

Ilona Szemzo writes

Tome II of Béla's memoirs, page 374 gives the exact date when the Germans came in to Hungary, 19th March 1944 and the tragedy started for our family.

There is a detailed description of all the attempts to convince Fridi to leave Füss (now Trávník in Slovakia) and hide, of Bela's and Janos's forced labour stints, and of Erika's return to Budapest.

Zsofi Szemzo writes

Béla's memoirs contain so many interesting things, the story is complex but the narrative not linear. Béla writes that his possessions and freedoms already started to be taken away from 1942 onwards, so they had to move around a lot, but he was really trying to be friends with everyone, to be able to keep working and stay living as things were, and he managed to do just that. In the Claims Conference document, it is noted that the property in Füss (Travník) was taken from Bela in 1942, but from his memoirs he then rented it back again. And for example he writes that at one point that in 1943 they took his car from him, so he went back to using a horse-drawn carriage.

The memoirs are hard to read, because he jumps between times and subjects, but I guess that is how our memory works. He doesn't detail negative things, he focuses more on the positive things that are important to him. We are lucky to have these memoirs, and letters and photographs, because some people do not have even these.

The arrival of the Germans in Hungary in March 1944 is relatively late in the war, many families had already perished long before. Our family was fortunate, perhaps due to a combination of luck and Béla's "diplomacy" to stay in touch with many people.

Education and Work

Béla was a land owner, who worked in the fields of agriculture farming, agricultural engineering and agricultural organisation. He also wrote about agriculture, and researched and translated material in this area.

He studied biology and chemistry in Berlin. His studies were interrupted by World War 1; he started his studies before the war and completed them after it.

Béla did advocacy work for sugar beet farmers and the sugar factories associations, and for other agricultural societies, and for the pan-European union of agriculture from 1921 onward. He started his work in this field in the sugar beetroot pricing commission in 1921, and after the war was head of the agricultural ministry before the Soviets took over, i.e. until 1948. Later on he worked for the Fodder Basis Research Institute, and published his research in numerous articles and books.



Béla Szemző in 1916

Béla's special privileges resulting from his World War I Service

Until 1944, Béla had a special status because of his World War I war record, so was not classified as a Jew by the Hungarian government.

Béla was drafted into the military in the First World War and fought from 1914 to 1918 winning many medals. For his wartime efforts (along with others who fought in WWI) he was exempt from the Jewish laws in Hungary for a limited time period. Catholicizing also gave him protection for a while. He could not have been drafted into the full military from the time of Frida's deportation (1942) onwards, because at that time he no longer counted as Hungarian. Later, in 1945, Béla and János had to hide in a basement in Budapest (see below).

Zsofi has provided further information on the use of Jewish labour in Hungary, see below.

Portraits of Bela's Wives

Béla possessed two portraits of his wives, one of Marianne Guth (his first wife) and one of Frida Schwitzer (second wife). The one of Marianne was saved in the war, because they had another house where was accidentally left in the attic, and a woman they had known called them to say she found it when the house was taken by the government, she secretly took it and kept it. So Béla then gave it to the lady Margit, who was in hiding with the Pali Szemzo, Béla's youngest brother, during the war. Margit was born Schwitzer (no relation), and is the daughter of Marianne's sister Liliy Guth; Margit now lives near Geneva.

Grave of Bela's First Wife and Son

Marianne and their baby Peter died after the birth from Spanish Flu. They are buried in Nove Zamky (Érsekújvár).



János's Labour Service

Béla's son János did *munkaszolgálat* (labour service) first in *Komárom* (Komarno) and then in *Ruszinszko* (Carpatho-Ukraine or Transcarpathia) in a camp. This area was annexed by Hungary in March 1939, and is now the southern part of the Ukraine. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carpatho-Ukraine> (EN) and <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruszinf%C3%B6ld> (HU).

But Béla somehow managed to save him, using papers obtained by Tóth Miklós (see below). So János was taken to Budapest to hide in Vajnai's basement where he stayed until March 1945. It seems Béla was busy all the time trying to stay ahead with these public relations, doing favours to a lot of people through his work, to try and stabilise everything.

Béla writes that, while János's did *munkaszolgálat*, although he was classified as Jewish, he had papers saying he was born Catholic, so he carried a different colour marked on his arm, and was treated less severely [Jews were made to wear yellow identification bands/stars].

Béla's Labour Service

Béla also did *munkaszolgálat* (labour service) on the frontline, but in Northern Transylvania (now Romania), as the leader of a *munkaszolgálat* group. This area was annexed by Hungary in September 1940, under the Second Vienna Award. Many *munkaszolgálatos* troops at that time were sent there. But Béla managed to get papers (obtained by Tóth Miklós, see below), and was eventually released.

Events after Labour Service

After release, Béla went to his brother Pali's house in *Érsekújvár* (Nove Zamky), where there was another friend who had come back from *munkaszolgálat* and they tried to get warm clothes from families who had been deported already. They got to know someone who was helping Jewish people while he was working with people in *munkaszolgálat*.

Béla and János were saved by a man named Tóth Miklós who was Béla's lawyer, he sent papers to the *munkaszolgálat* (labour service) where they were separately stationed, and that is why they were sent back. This same man went to the internment camp in Léva (Levice) to find Frida, but she had already been deported the day before. The same man personally went to Ruszinszko (Carpatho-Ukraine) to look for János in the *munkaszolgálat* camp. János had

frozen wounds [frostbite], but Miklós was able to have him released and brought him to Budapest to hide in Vajna's basement, on the Buda side.

Frida Schwitzer (MKS's aunt)

Meanwhile Béla's wife Frida was in Füss (now Trávník in Komárno district of Slovakia), but was taken to Verebély (Vráble, SE of Nitra, beyond Velky Lapas), then to Léva (Levice, also in Nitra District, a bit further SE from Nitra), and then deported. Béla had sent his friend Verő Géza to get Frida out of Füss, and Frida had some fake papers Béla had made for her, stating she was catholic (she really was catholic, but they couldn't use earlier papers any more), but she refused to go to Nitra to hide with this friend. Mancsi and Gyuri also tried to take her to Érsekújvár (Nove Zamky), but she insisted on staying in Füss.

Someone who survived Auschwitz and remembered Frida said that she prayed in the train wagon during her deportation, trying to pray with others to keep their spirits lifted. According to this person's testimony, on arrival she was immediately taken to the gas chambers.

That day she met with Béla's *sógor* (brother-in-law) István Eőrsi, who was also in the camps, and he said the same thing that she was selected in a group not for work, he told this to the friend who came back. István Eőrsi did slave labour in a factory, and later died.

Frida Schwitzer is in Yad Vashem, the testimony is from Julia Diamant in Israel in 1999 and she dates Frida's death as 1942 in this document.

Ilona, who contacted Julia's granddaughter some years ago, understood that Julia was the daughter of a friend of Fridi's. Julia was a young woman at the time of the war. Julia and her mother together with Fridi were deported from the same town in Slovakia to Auschwitz. Her mother and Fridi died there. Julia survived and eventually settled in Israel. Ilona believes their deportation was in 1944.

Return to Budapest

Later Béla came to Budapest from Érsekújvár (Nove Zamky) from Pali's place. He took a room in Gellért Szálló (the Hotel Gellert) (what a crazy idea!) because his apartment in Budapest (Naphegy utca 11) was requisitioned by the German Nazis, and the German General living in it had an assistant who was a lady who Béla knew before (I dont know if this lady gave the address to this Nazis or why they took the flat). Béla writes that in the Hotel Gellért he could

hide better because they didn't know his identity. He also also bought butter for the hotel staff, thereby helping his survival through these "public relations".

Béla writes a lot about how one by one all his possessions and work opportunities were taken from him from 1939 onwards, but at the same time he writes about having a degree of freedom because he always paid attention to "public relations".

Erika Szemzo

Meanwhile Erika (Béla's daughter) was in Lukamajor [Lukov Dvor, near Nitra]. But she was smuggled out to the border in July 1944 and Béla took her to Buda to the apartment of Kárász Artúr, where she was registered as the nanny of his three kids.

Zsofi adds that Artúr Kárász was the head of the National Bank in 1945 after the war and he also worked at the World bank later on, and he wrote a memoir about his life see: <https://www.antikvarium.hu/konyv/karasz-artur-80-ev-a-fold-korul-109533-0>

Béla's Parents

Meanwhile Béla's parents Lajos Szemző and Rudolfina Policzer (83 and 70 years old at the time) were deported and perished. Béla had a fictive memorial made for them (which seems strange to me) in Nitra's Catholic Cemetery. Zsofi has found their Yad Vashem entries, by Julia Diamant (now resident in Israel). We don't know how she knew them. Lajos is entered as Ludvig Schlesinger, and Rudolfina as Regina Schlesinger born Politzer. There is also some dispute about the date, Julia Diamant reported their death as 1942, whereas Béla's writes that they were deported in 1944.

Hiding in wartime Budapest in the Hotel Gellert and Museum utca 5

Béla continued to live in the Hotel Gellért, and kept relations with Jewish friends afloat, e.g. the Fellner family.

Béla's siter Kató was hiding at Simonffy Margó's house. Béla's brother-in-law Eőrsi István refused to give away the Fellner family's hiding place, and as a result was deported and (as said before) died in the camps.

Béla and Eőrsi István had studied at the same time in Berlin. István, who perished in the camps, had married Béla's sister Kató.

Here is István Eőrsi's entry in Yad Vashem:

<https://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=5782890&ind=1>

After a while Béla met by chance on the street a WW1 friend called Jenő Ollé-Kunos, who asked him how on earth is he walking on the street so unafraid. Béla said he had the right papers, but the friend said that is not enough anymore. So Béla went into hiding at the friend's apartment at Múzeum utca 5 in Pest side. This man was a soldier, so Béla was safe.

Zsofi found Jenő Ollé-Kunos's registration as a soldier here:

<https://m.militaria.hu/rang/cd/1941/betuo.html>

Béla only went out walking in the evenings with the soldier friend at his side, otherwise he stayed in the apartment always. But he could only stay two weeks because they asked him to leave. He went back to the hotel. Bombing started, so they stayed in the basement of the Gellért Hotel. Germans were also in the basement hiding: when there was less bombing, they all returned to their hotel rooms. Béla managed to go every day to visit his friend Vajna István, where János was hiding in the basement. He played cards with this friend and János. Then one day he was able to move back to Jenő Ollé-Kunos's house (Múzeum utca 5), as Jenő was now fleeing from the Russians (like many Hungarian soldiers who could see that the situation was hopeless). Jenő went to Győr, and left his apartment to Béla for the time being. So Béla now also brought Erika with him to Múzeum utca 5.

Béla recounted in this story how he had to give presents to everyone, such as meat from Fűss, and other edible things. He also brought his sister Kató and his brother Pali & wife to Múzeum utca 5, because at that time it was safer than being in Buda, together with another unknown lady. They were in rows by the Hungarian Nazis the nyilas's, but they managed to escape by some person who was trying to deport them, by giving that person two gold [coins].

Because of bombing, they had to stay in the basement of Múzeum utca 5, and on 16th January 1945 the Russians found them there. Szép Ernő, a poet, was also hiding in the same basement (see

https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sz%C3%A9p_Ern%C5%91).

Béla still had some gold [coins] and jewels on him, and because of the bombing they went to another house on Baross Street, but later on came back [to Múzeum utca 5].

The Germans bombed all the bridges of Budapest and retreated to the Buda side. Béla gave the keys of the apartment back to the concierge of the building, and they all went over to Kató Néni's old apartment in Buyovszky Street. It took four more weeks for János to be able to come over from Buda after the bombing had stopped.

Historical Context – The Siege of Budapest

From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Budapest

There was already some American and British and bombing of key infrastructure in Budapest from April 1944. In September 1944, Soviet forces entered Hungary, and on 29-10-1944 began an offensive against the city with one million men. By 26-12-1944 Soviet and Romanian forces had completely encircled Budapest, and so began a 50 day siege in which 38,000 civilians died through starvation or military action. The German commander was under orders to fight to the last man, though a breakout attempt was made (but failed). The Germans surrendered the city unconditionally on 13-2-1945.

Whilst this Allied victory would lead to first Vienna and then Berlin being eventually taken from German control, Budapest lay in ruins with more than 80 percent of its buildings destroyed or damaged, including the Parliament Building and Castle, and all seven bridges destroyed. Soviet forces had suffered between 100,000 and 160,000 casualties. In January 1945, Soviet forces arrested and transported 32,000 ethnic Germans from Hungary for forced labour.

Múzeum utca 5

<https://www.google.hu/maps/place/Budapest,+Múzeum+u.+5,+1088/@47.490262,19.0628748,3a,75y,177.12h,115t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s-U9izzaDJ1Q6t4rC Ettjg!2e0!7i16384!8i8192!4m13!1m7!3m6!1s0x4741dc5b063eff5d:0x37031af3bc0ab3d5!2sBudapest,+Múzeum+u.+5,+1088!3b1!8m2!3d47.4901382!4d19.0630064!3m4!1s0x4741dc5b063eff5d:0x37031af3bc0ab3d5!8m2!3d47.4901382!4d19.0630064>

Holocaust Claims

Zsofi found claims that were made, amongst a huge bundle of claims in the Claims Conference International Holocaust Documentation Archive (<https://www.ushmm.org>), this organisation is in Washington DC, Ilona and Zsofi visited it together.

See https://collections.ushmm.org/findingaids/RG-39.039M_01_fnd_hu.pdf

The entry reads:

368./744.csomó.Az1942:XV.tc.alapjáni
ngatlanaikátengedésérekötelezettekiratanyagáttartalmazacsomó.-
T.8036.Szemző BélaésnejeSchwitzerFrida,dr.Szemző Pál,Szemző
Ernő,Barsfüss.1-66o

Note by Zsofi Szemzo on Bela's labour service (as referenced in letter 042)

The word *behívtak* can mean "being called up" for military service, but it was not possible for a person of Jewish origin to be called for military service, even with the protections of WW1 medals and catholicization papers, as after a certain date in 1944 these did not count anymore, as demonstrated by what happened to Frida, and to so many people. So in Béla's case, *behívtak* probably means *munkaszolgálat* i.e. forced work labour. This should not be confused with what Béla did after the war, when he took part in efforts as part of the government from 1946 to 1948 until the soviets took over.

Note by Zsofi Szemzo on use of Jewish labour in wartime Hungary

Vera's (my grandma's) uncle was called in to *munkaszolgálat*, and luckily came back, but Béla's sister Kató Néni's husband was called up too, and did not return. Another example was author Béla Hamvas who was called up for forced labour and never came back. Also Miklós Radnóti, a poet, and many other were forced to work like that. However many people did return from this forced labour e.g. the painter Lajos Vajda. Initially people returned home regularly, working in construction, factories, mines, and building for the military. The anti-Jewish laws would have made it impossible for jews to go into the army. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_service_in_Hungary_during_World_War_II

In spring 1941, another Jewish labour service, the "auxiliary service", was created. Decree No. 2,870 M. E. of 1941 provided that conscripts regarded as

Jews had to fulfill this obligation “by performing auxiliary service in the army” and could not be ranked. The provision was later ratified in law by parliament.

By summer 1943, hundreds of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish labourers were working within and outside the borders, and several labour service systems were in place: military squadrons (for Hungarians and national minorities), public service battalions, and auxiliary (Jewish) working legions.

In March 1944, there were about 63,000 Jewish labourers. Following the German occupation of Hungary, by the end of April 1944 new squadrons were set up: 31 auxiliary (Jewish) squadrons and 62 military (national and Christian Hungarian) squadrons, with a total of 21,576 people. At the end of April, rural Jewry was already ghettoised in the Carpaths, and on 15th May 1955, their deportation to Auschwitz began. At the same time, the Hungarian and German authorities agreed that in order to alleviate the labour problems of the German army, about 150,000 able-bodied Jews should be exempt from deportation. There were plans to increase the numbers of Jewish labour squadrons from 210 to 575. In the first half of May 1944, Jewish men were urgently enlisted, the so-called SAS summons of the additional headquarters even came from the ghetto. Probably several army leaders took part in these actions not only out of duty, but to save people from the death camps; in fact, the measures may have saved many tens of thousands of Hungarian Jewish men from deportation to Auschwitz.

Some of Budapest's forced labour was used for demolition work and later ramparting. Rural people were employed mainly in the construction of fortifications, restoration of railway lines, road maintenance, extraction of building materials, industrial plant debris cleaning and in military factories.

On 26-10-1944, after the *Nyilas* (Hungarian Nazi Party Movement) takeover, and at the request of Germany, 70 German labour squadrons were ordered to build a fortification system (the "Eastern Wall") designed to protect Vienna at around the Hungarian border. The Szálasi government relied on this unpaid labour during the war, in the post-war reconstruction, and to replace of the Hungarian soldiers captured by the Soviets. In addition to the labour squadrons, tens of thousands of civilian Jewish residents of Budapest were “lent” to the Germans to build the “eastern wall”.

From 20-10-1943 it had been ordered that able-bodied Jewish men between the ages of 16 and 60, and later younger Jewish women, apply for “defense service”. This meant the construction of ramparts around Budapest, which is

why they were called “Rampart Jews” for a time, as opposed to the “real” military auxiliary service. Soon, thousands of Jews were again taken from houses marked with a yellow star by the Arrow Cross and driven to the site of the brick factory in Óbuda. They and the majority of the so-called “Rampart Jews” were sent on foot to the western border from 6-11-1943. Many of the civilian, mostly female, “labourers” died on the way. The people who came to Hegyeshalom [border crossing], hungry and exhausted, were handed over to the Germans for forced labour.