

BOOK REVIEWS

Tóth, János Aldemár OSB: *Ilyennek láttam bencés rendtársaimat [This Is How I Saw My Benedictine Confreres]*. Budapest, METEM, 2024, 100 p. ISBN 978-615-5826-41-2.

This modestly sized publication contains the life-history interview of Benedictine monk János Aldermár Tóth (1921–1986). His confrere, Szilveszter Sólymos, recorded the interview on tape in September 1977, presumably at Pannonhalma. The recording of Father Aldemár, who spoke with innate naturalness, was preserved by parish priest László Szyahula, who forwarded it to Pannonhalma a few years ago. The interview transcript was edited by Ádám Somorjai OSB, who provided not only an introduction but also numerous other important and useful pieces of information, which (besides the footnotes, included in the Appendix) contain: a list of the Benedictine monks of Komárom between 1950 and 1989; the fathers' various work assignments, divided into categories; their necrology; biographies; the monastic names of the aforementioned Benedictines; an index of personal and geographical names; a map; a Hungarian–Slovak glossary of names for the map; and illustrations. This is the 3rd volume in the series *Our Distinguished Benedictine Teachers*, with Asztrik Várszegi as the responsible of publisher.

It may already be evident from the above paragraph that we are dealing with an unparalleled wealth of source material. (Here we need not even mention the editor's exceptionally careful additions: once again, Ádám Somorjai, emeritus Vatican archivist, has drawn upon his astonishing reservoir of knowledge. For those unable to access this volume, his open-access publication *Benedictines in Komárom 1919–1998* is recommended: <https://doi.org/10.61795/fssr.v27y2025i2.05>.)

With all-encompassing attentiveness, János Aldemár Tóth speaks about his life—from his childhood up to the time of the conversation—

and his narration, vivid and oral in style yet organized and chronologically consistent, goes into such detail and nuance that it offers a rich treasure trove for the history of education, ethnography, historical studies, and sociology alike.

Being from Deáki, in recalling the experiences of his childhood, he mentions not only the local municipal, school, or clerical leaders—among them, naturally, Jusztinián Serédi—but also the close relationship between the family of the then young altar boy (the future Benedictine father) and the later Prince Primate. Thus, for example, he notes about Marcell Serédi:

He was said to be a very talented man; what we know of him is that he carried out optical experiments, but his early death prevented him from perfecting this work. I heard that Master Jusztinián wanted to become a *matéta* [i.e., a mathematician] so that he could continue his brother's invention, but Abbot Primate Ipoly Fehér sent him to Rome instead.

Similarly, already at the beginning of the narrative we learn that after completing the fifth year of elementary school, János Aldemár Tóth entered the high school in Komárom. Drawing on the impressions he experienced there firsthand as a student, he presents not only the entire teaching staff but also the student body: many classmates came from the Szepes region and from the area around Kassa, and two even came from Subcarpathia. The context of the story remains the First Czechoslovak Republic, created after the change of borders after WWI, except for the so-called “Hungarian times,” from the First Vienna Award until the end of WWII.

It was during this intermezzo, in 1940, that Aldemár entered the Order; at the time, he was a history student under Gyula Szekfű. However, soon again he was to live out the fate of Hun-

garians in Czechoslovakia: internment, prison, and labor camps in Western Bohemia—roughly in the area near Casanova’s resting place.

On page 62 of the book, we see a photograph of János Aldemár Tóth on a hillside, wearing a beret, shirt-sleeves rolled up, breviary in hand, praying. The fulfilment of his life was in his service as assistant priest and parish priest. (His life is discussed in greater detail by Imre Molnár in the monograph *Deáki* [Száz Magyar Falu Könyvesháza, Budapest, 2002].)

There is no opportunity here to present the subject of the publication chapter by chapter or thematically. Overall, it clearly presents a society of shared fate, a community of destiny, portrayed through a single life and life story. This life, in one way or another, belongs to many of us, either because our roots can be traced back to that era or because they are grounded in it. However, since I have already mentioned the school, in the Komárom secondary school the author had 91 classmates, of whom 87 eventually graduated (27 of them girls).

Briefly on the introduction of his confreres, he recounts, for example, that although Lucián Bíró knew Slovak, he also knew that in Znióvár, thanks to the local secondary school, there were many educated people. “That is why he had to prepare much more for his Slovak sermons than he once did for his Hungarian ones. This was partly the reason why his sermons gradually gained such great renown.” (Aldemár’s confrere, the Roman Catholic priest Lucián Bíró, spent five years interned in Znió.)

Of Menyhért Czuczor, who likewise suffered internment, imprisonment, monastic forced labor, and so on—and with whom he spent five years—he recounts:

When we were sent to the Czech lands for more serious work, he was placed in a textile factory. After a few weeks of work the foreman said of him, “He is such an excellent skilled worker. It is as if he had already been working in the factory for 10–20 years.”

This is a work that enriches the reader with profound insights. Ádám Somorjai is right when he writes of János Aldemár Tóth’s oral history:

Under the conditions of the one-party state, it required great courage to give such a detailed account of the lives of his Benedictine confreres. Before his dear fellow monk, the Benedictine teacher with a historian’s interest and a vivid memory summarized the troubled fate and history of the Hungarian Benedictine confreres in Slovakia.

I would add that the author’s origins, his family and communal life, his fate, the vicissitudes of history (not least the realities of the one-party regime), and above all his personality and character obliged him to speak with courage and frankness—indeed, no other path lay open to him.

Gábor Csanda

Deák, András Miklós – Somorjai, Ádám OSB – Zinner, Tibor: In Refuge. American Diplomats on Cardinal Mindszenty (1956–1970). Magyar Napló Kiadó, 2025, 872 p. ISBN 978-963-5411-566.

In 2025 the *Magyar Napló* Publishing House expanded its series on Cardinal József Mindszenty with a valuable new source – an especially timely addition, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Cardinal’s passing away on May 6, 1975.¹ The first volume in the series – *In Refuge: American Diplomats on Cardinal Mindszenty, 1957–1970*² – was launched at a commemorative conference organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of

1 See the original Hungarian language book review: Vendriczki, Róbert: „Mindszenty bíboros menedéke – a Magyar Napló angol nyelvű »ikerköteté«.” *Magyar Napló* 2025/9, 68-70.

2 Magyar Napló Kiadó Budapest, 2019.

Hungary in October 2019. The second volume in the series assumed a bilingual format: *The Host and His Guest: Chargé Garret G. Ackerson and Cardinal József Mindszenty (1957–1961)*, authored by A. M. Deák and Ádám Somorjai OSB.³ The third volume – *Secrets of the American Archives: Selected Writings on Cardinal Mindszenty* – included nine studies by Father Somorjai.⁴ This collection contributed significantly to the further development of the “Mindszenty family of publications”, revealing an even more complex portrait of the Cardinal than previous works.

Readers, comparing the first and the newly published fourth “family member”, will immediately realize that they are conceived of as twin volumes. This is made visually evident by the identical design of their covers. The front cover features a portrait of Cardinal Mindszenty, superimposed over the red hues of the Hungarian and American flags blending together. The back cover includes a quotation from the legal advice issued by the U.S. Department of State in 1960 that clarifies that the United States provided the Cardinal with humanitarian *refuge*, rather than political *asylum*. It is commendable that both volumes accurately reflect this legal distinction in their titles.

Although the two are presented as twin volumes, they are not “identical twins.” The edition of 2019 published documents from the period 1957–1970, whereas the new expanded edition also includes materials from 1956. Specifically, the latter incorporates documents produced in November and December of 1956, thereby expanding the “twin” volume with 19 additional archival records. It is extremely helpful that page 8 of the new volume presents a photograph of the handwritten register (The Duty Log), listing the documents dated between 9 November and 18 December 1956. Among these is a notable entry concerning the message that Cardinal

Mindszenty addressed to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld (1953–1961) on 9 November. It is in this context that Chargé d’Affaires Wailes reported to Washington that he had refused to allow the mission to serve as a base for the Cardinal’s political activities. An official reply, dated 12 November, confirmed that the Legation could not be used as a platform for any political or ecclesiastical activities. Thus, just eight days after Mindszenty’s arrival at the U.S. Legation on Szabadság tér⁵, an official American document clarified that he had been granted humanitarian *refuge*, not political *asylum*. The title of the English edition – *In Refuge* – accurately reflects this legal reality. The former status, based on humanitarian law, was intended to protect the Cardinal’s life and physical well-being while did not allow any engagement in political or ecclesiastical leadership activities.

And now, let us highlight the great contribution of Donald B. Kursch (b. Brooklyn, 1942) to the survival of the *Duty Log*. After the conclusion of the Cardinal’s *refuge* at the Legation, it emerged that the duty officers had been keeping a handwritten logbook recording all incoming and outgoing diplomatic communications, details about visitors, confessors and contact persons in case of emergency. How did we, researchers discover this source several years later? Without Kursch’s intervention, the *Duty Log* would have likely been lost to scholarship. From 1971 to 1975 Kursch served as a consul and later as a diplomat responsible for economic affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, returning for a second posting in 1986 as the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) under Ambassador Mark Palmer. During an oral history interview⁶ following the aforementioned con-

3 Magyar Napló Kiadó Budapest, 2021.

4 Magyar Napló Kiadó Budapest, 2021.

5 Liberty Square, District 5, Budapest.

6 Deák, András Miklós: *Mindszenty bíboros az elbeszélte történelemben – Mindszenty bíboros követségi menedékének egyes vetületei az amerikai elbeszélte történelemben*. L’Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest, 2021.

ference, Kursch recounted the story which – upon learning of the twin volume project – he repeated in writing for András Deák. Kursch told him that the last U.S. liaison officer who maintained direct contact with the Cardinal was Clement Scerback (1922–2005). After Scerback’s passing away, his widow, Wilma L. Scerback (1922–2022) showed Kursch a “log-book-like” document among her late husband’s papers which appeared to be of significant historical value. Recognizing its importance, Kursch donated the *Duty Log* to the U.S. National Archives (NARA) where this treasure has been preserved ever since. In such a way, this archival source was later located by Father Ádám Somorjai and his research team who used it as a compass for their further studies.

Following Kursch’s personal recollections, the volume includes a valuable scholarly essay by Tibor Zinner, entitled “*What We Had Barely Known, or What Used to BE Concealed...*”. This study serves as an ideal introduction to the *Duty Log* and the related sources, helpfully preparing the reader for the material ahead. Zinner explores who visited the Cardinal during his refuge, including both his family members and high-ranking church figures, such as Franz König, the Archbishop of Vienna. The essay also presents a more humanized portrayal of the Prince Primate, examining his daily religious practices and health issues, and places his experience within the broader context of the Cold War tensions and the Hungarian–American diplomatic relations.

Looking to the future of the Mindszenty “book family”, one important question still remains:

Will the *Magyar Napló* series continue to grow beyond its current four volumes? In the present author’s view, a comprehensive treatment of the final year of the Cardinal’s refuge (1971) is still required. Although this particular year had previously been covered in a bilingual edition – *His Eminence Files, American Embassy, Budapest. From Embassy Archives, 15 (1971)*⁷ –, new research could offer significant additions and corrections. At the same time, there is also an opportunity to publish the original English-language archival documents in full rather than in summary or an excerpted form.

To whom, then, is *In Refuge*, this new and valuable source, most recommended? It will be of particular interest to readers and researchers focused on diplomatic history – especially those exploring Hungarian-American relations – and who wish to study the material in both languages. It is also well suited to those interested in the day-to-day operations of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Budapest during the Cold War. Most importantly, it is an essential reading for those seeking to understand the history of Cardinal Mindszenty’s refuge from the perspective of American diplomats, through the lens of the original English language documentation.

Róbert Vendriczki

7 Published by METEM, Magyar Egyháztörténeti Enciklopédia Munkaközösség, Budapest, 2008.