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Viable Cooperation or Unscrupulous Service? Motivations for Albert Bereczky's Activity in Church Governance²

Abstract.

Albert Bereczky is one of the controversial figures in the 20th-century history of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Bereczky was a genuine and authentic leader of those who fought for the inner spiritual renewal of the church between the two world wars, a church organizer, a well-known and respected preacher, who saved many by risking his life during the deportation of Hungarian Jews to extermination camps, for which he was posthumously awarded the honorary title "Righteous Among the Nations" from the Yad Vashem. However, the communist state apparatus established after World War II found in him the person who, by placing him at the head of the Reformed Church, could bring about a radical reduction of the public and social role of the Church almost without any resistance. So, the question arises: how and why could Bereczky, whose Christian commitment was hard to question, become the servant of the dictatorial state apparatus with its atheistic ideology?

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Our study attempts to record the possible intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that might explain this dilemma, while also providing a general insight into Albert Bereczky's life.

Keywords: Bishop Albert Bereczky, Zoltán Tildy, Church–state relationship, communist persecution of Christians, collaboration

1. Intrinsic Motivations

1.1 *The Power of Origin*

As for the intrinsic motivations, Albert Bereczky's origin deserves attention first. According to a rumour that was already widespread during Bereczky's lifetime, Bereczky was the illegitimate child of Count Albert Apponyi, a prominent diplomat of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy. Aside from the accounts saying that Bereczky himself repeatedly stated this,³ we only have indirect evidence to prove it.⁴ Nevertheless, even if this situation

³ The earliest state security reports treated it as a fact that Albert Bereczky was the son of Count Apponyi, although this suited them to emphasize Bereczky's class antagonism and his connections with aristocratic reactionary individuals. In any case, all this shows how widespread the rumour was. See the Historical Archives of the State Security Services (hereinafter referred to as ÁBTL) O-9047 61. 22 March 1946; Miklós Mester considered the rumour true. See MESTER, Miklós (2012): *Arcképek. Két tragikus kor árnyékában*. Budapest, Tarsoly Kiadó. According to Gyula Muraközy, Bereczky acknowledged in his student years that he was Apponyi's son: ÁBTL O-9047 388–396. 22 June 1956; István Kardos, in his biography of his father, János Kardos, refers to the fact that when his father and Bereczky were classmates at the Reformed Grammar School in Kunszentmiklós, Bereczky was even making a boast of his supposed noble origins. KARDOS, István (1989): *Apám*. London (manuscript found in the Ráday Manuscript Collection of the Danubian Reformed Church District 272/2015). 7. On 7 June 2019, on one of the occasions of the “Universal Lectures” series of the Budapest-Pasarét Reformed Congregation, one of Bereczky's grandchildren publicly claimed that he accepted his descent from the Apponyi family, while another grandchild denied it on the same occasion.

⁴ Albert Bereczky was baptized in the Catholic parish church of St Francis of Assisi in Bakáts Square in Budapest, close to which Endre Bereczky and Mária Pongrácz lived. His godfather is listed as Albert Apponyi in the parish church register. Also, in the register of births, the term “törv.” was used for children born in wedlock, and the abbreviation “ttelen.” for children

was not true, it is clear that Bereczky was a descendant of a declassified noble family. Her mother, Baroness Mária Pongrácz, came from an impoverished Catholic aristocratic family from Felvidék (Upper Hungary, currently Slovakia), who, after serving as a housekeeper to Albert Apponyi, married the then elderly Endre Bereczky, a Reformed landowner. After the early death of Endre Bereczky, Pongrácz had to get a job in Dunabogdány: she became a postmaster⁵ and married Géza Kovács, the local Reformed minister. Although his foster-father's personal life example and his approach to vocation were decisive factors in Albert Bereczky's choice of the pastoral vocation,⁶ in the views of the time, for her mother, who hailed from a noble family, it must have meant declassing. Leaving the Apponyi household, where she had resided, and relocating to Ferencváros with Endre Bereczky contributed to this perception. Ultimately, her social standing diminished further, as she became a minister's wife in Dunabogdány, relying on gainful employment. Bereczky's personality may have been shaped and defined throughout his life by his mother's loss of status, which may have given rise to the feeling that he deserved a better fate and a desire for validation and recognition. This may be related to the fact that Bereczky was repeatedly portrayed by his close acquaintances as a vain and ambitious man,⁷ traits which his serious connection with revivalism could not extinguish in him and which can also be found in the church in the case of pastors with exceptional preaching and congregational leadership skills, such as Bereczky.

born out of wedlock. We can read only by Bereczky's name the remark "legitimate by state laws". According to the current (2017) parish priest of the church and other archivist colleagues, the specific term was intended as a concealing indication by the parish priest who christened him that Bereczky's origin was ecclesiastically illegitimate.

⁵ PÁLYI, Vilmos (1966): *Nehéz esztendőök és az első országos kezdeményezés Dunabogdányban*. In: *Református Egyház*. 18, 7–8. 148; ÁBTL O-9047 388.

⁶ ZSINDELYNÉ TÜDŐS, Klára (1978): *Arcképek*. Budapest, Református Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya. 14.

⁷ See, for example: ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047 /388-396; 22.06.1956. Characterization of the informant codenamed Zsigmond Kemény (Gyula Muraközy) about Albert Bereczky.

1.2. Feeling Marginalized

In addition to his impoverished noble self-consciousness, Bereczky's personality may have been defined by a feeling of marginalization, and that he often encountered obstacles in his efforts to self-assert; or at least that he may have felt that his environment and circumstances prevented him from gaining recognition for his ambitions, but also for his abilities. This may also have contributed to the fact that once he had the opportunity, he sought to gain access to power and to stay in it.

His sense of marginalization may have been linked to his theological views, his closer church connections, his friendships and family ties, and his political orientation. More specifically, between the two world wars, neither Bereczky's revival-evangelical theological orientation, nor his more finely tuned social sensitivity, nor his rather left-wing political orientation acquired through his friend Zoltán Tildy⁸ were supported by the dominant ecclesiastical and political culture of the time. All this may have given Bereczky a sense of being marginalized and that the ecclesiastical, the secular political and social structure between the two world wars was holding him back. We shall examine this in more detail.

Bereczky spent his secondary school years in Reformed Grammar Schools at Kunszentmiklós, Kecskemét, and Pápa, the latter becoming the scene of his most significant spiritual and human encounters in his later life. In Pápa, he established lifelong friendships with Zoltán Tildy and Imre Szabó, with whom he became an opponent in church politics by the end of the 1940s.⁹ There he also met János Victor, only five years older than him, who became a kind of spiritual father and theological mentor (and later a relative). He gained his first personal impulses in revival theology through one of Victor's sermons delivered in Pápa.¹⁰ According to his own account, Bereczky enrolled at the Pápa

⁸ Tildy's person and career will be described in more detail later in this article.

⁹ SZABÓ IMRÉNÉ SZABÓ, Éva (ed.) (2001): *“Ég de meg nem emésztetik”. Szabó Imre a Budapesti Református Egyházmegye Első Esperese. Naplók 1914–1954.* Budapest, Budahegyvidéki Református Egyházközség. 220–221; KISS, Réka (2006a): Bereczky Albert lelkipásztori, püspöki működése. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten.* Vol. 1. Budapest, Argumentum. 601.

¹⁰ “For the first time in my life, I was struck like lightning by the power of the person of Jesus Christ. The young theology student secretary spoke about Jesus Christ, and I said afterwards, ‘we have never heard of the person this young man was talking about’.” [The translations of all,

Reformed Seminary under the influence of the aforementioned friends, even though his mother – another important link to Albert Apponyi – would have preferred to have her son educated as a diplomat. Under the influence of his friends and some of his teachers – especially József Pongrácz and Sándor Czeglédy –, he came even closer to the understanding of revival theology. He had a conversion experience at the MEKDSZ (Hungarian Christian Student Organization) summer conference in Felsőszeli,¹¹ making him more and more critical of the spiritual, social, and ecclesiastical processes of the Reformed Church of the era.¹² After a short period of studying abroad (in Basel, Switzerland), passing his pastoral examinations and getting married,¹³ he was commissioned as an assistant pastor in Balassagyarmat to found a new congregation in Salgótarján, in the northern industrial area of Hungary (1916–1919).¹⁴ Through his ministry, Bereczky gained his first pastoral experience in congregations mainly consisting of factory workers and miners, facing the realities of their life, the difficulties and the frequent indifference associated with the working class of the time.

During the chaos of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, being already a father of two,¹⁵ Bereczky fled first to Kisoroszi and then took over his foster-father's former ministry in Dunabogdány. He became an active participant in the various movements of the Reformed spiritual and social pathfinding after World War I. He took part in the

originally non-English quotations belong to Augusta Szász.] BEREZKY, Albert (1961b): Victor János temetése. In: Bereczky, Albert (ed.): *Hitben való engedelmesség*. Budapest, Református Egyetemes Konvent Sajtóosztálya. 67; BEREZKY, Albert (1961a): Két nagy misszionáriusunk: Emlékezés Victor Jánosról és Mott Jánosról. In: Bereczky, Albert (ed.): *Hitben való engedelmesség*. Budapest, Református Egyetemes Konvent Sajtóosztálya. 309.

¹¹ HAJDÚ, Péter (1986): Bereczky Albert hagyatéka. *Theológiai Szemle*. 39, 5. 305; See more in: LÁNYI, J. Gábor (2021b): Bishop Albert Bereczky (1893–1966) and the Revival Movement: Albert Bereczky's Conversion. In: *Perichoresis*. 19, 1. 91–100.

¹² SZABÓ IMRÉNÉ SZABÓ 2001, 198.

¹³ On 26 September 1916, he married Piroska Bencsik, a teacher born in Mezőtúr. His friendship with Tildy is exemplified by the fact that Tildy asked God's blessing on the newlyweds in his church in Szenna. LADÁNYI, Sándor (1994): Bereczky Albert centenáriuma. In: *Reformáció*. 2, 2–3. 32.

¹⁴ Officially, his ministry in Salgótarján lasted between 20 September 1916 and 15 October 1919.

¹⁵ Piroska, 1917; Mária, 1919.

foundation of the so-called Pécel Circle, founded by Gyula Forgács, the minister of Pécel, who was succeeded by Bereczky in 1924. In 1922, Bereczky started a newspaper called *Igehirdető* [Preacher] and took on the organization of a mission to distribute tracts, pamphlets, revivalist literature in the Danubian Reformed Church District region.¹⁶ After the Pécel Circle, he became the general secretary and travelling minister of Hit és Szolgálat Mozgalom [Faith and Service Movement], and then director of the Magyar Traktátus Társaság és Sylvester Nyomda Printing House founded by his closest friend Zoltán Tildy. Bereczky's evangelization tours earned him a national reputation. In 1927, together with Tildy, he organized the first Reformed Great Assembly in Budapest,¹⁷ and then in 1930 they relocated Sylvester Printing House to Budapest, moving into the newly built press building with their families. After the bankruptcy of Sylvester Printing House,¹⁸ László Ravasz, Bishop of the Danubian Reformed Church District, entrusted Bereczky with the development of the new congregation in Külső-Lipót-Terézváros, more commonly known as the "Tutaj Street", into a mother congregation. On 6 December 1931, the congregation becoming a mother church elected him pastor. Bereczky has done an exemplary congregation-building work in the mission area, which includes the working-class neighbourhoods of Angyalföld and is home to some 8,000 Reformed Christians.¹⁹ In addition to his evocative sermons and awakening the social sensitivity of the congregation, he organized small circles for almost every societal levels of the congregation. In keeping with his interest in journalism, the congregation launched a newspaper in 1936 titled *Hálaadás* [Giving Thanks], but in addition to editing *Igehirdető*, launched in 1922, he was also member of the Editorial Board of *Református Figyelő* [Reformed Observer] between 1928 and 1933 and co-editor of *Keresztényen Család* [Christian Family], *Református Élet* [Reformed Life], and *Magyar Református Ébredés* [Hungarian

¹⁶ PÁLYI 1966, 148.

¹⁷ See more in: SZÁSZ, Lajos (2019): Országos Református Nagygyűlések a Horthy-korszakban. In: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor (eds.): *HIT2018. Hagyomány, Identitás, Történelem*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L'Harmattan Kiadó. 375–390.

¹⁸ An informant codenamed Zsigmond Kemény cited the sloppiness and frivolity of Bereczky and Tildy in financial matters as the cause of the bankruptcy. He also notes that Tildy was taken to court over the false balance of their accountant, where Bereczky's efforts succeeded in clearing his good faith and innocence. ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/389.

¹⁹ LADÁNYI 1994, 32.

Reformed Awakening].²⁰ Bereczky's frankness, suggestive power, and "prophetic" character won him many admirers among the members of the workers' congregation as well as among the well-known figures of the Budapest public life. The popular writer of the era, Rózsa Ignác described him as "the priest, whose voice is heard by the people of Pest and Buda from afar..."²¹ "Every single man felt that he was speaking to him, addressing him."²² – characterized him the fashion designer Klára Zsindelyné Tüdős; "Myself and we, who were children and young people at that time, were indeed Uncle Berci's children."²³ – confessed about Bereczky's pastoral character his later emigré critic Gyula Gombos.

Bereczky, as a leading representative of the revivalist home mission movement, and especially as the close friend and son-in-law of the leading light of interbellum Hungarian interconfessional revivalism, János Victor, was inevitably confronted by its critics, especially Jenő Sebestyén, a major representative of the confessionalist renewal movement, called Historical Calvinism.²⁴ *Református Figyelő* (1928–1933), the journal of the home mission trend – of which Bereczky was also editor – and *Kálvinista Szemle* [Calvinist Review] led by Sebestyén were used for veiled disputes, but not infrequently open and sharp theological exchanges. Ravasz's church governance did not vote for either direction openly but tried to channel the spiritual resources of both directions into the inner revival of the Reformed Church.²⁵ Due to the financial hardships caused by the Great Depression, the *Szemle* and the *Figyelő* both ceased publication, and their editors were forced to work together in Ravasz's newly founded newspaper, *Református*

²⁰ REVICZKY, Béla (ed.) (2001): *Hálaadás. A Pozsonyi Úti Református Egyházközség története 1921–2001*. Budapest.

²¹ IGNÁCZ, Rózsa (1943): *Templomban*. In: *Magyarország*. 27 April.

²² ZSINDELYNÉ TÜDŐS 1978, 37.

²³ Qtd in: REVICZKY 2001, 52. For Bereczky's pastoral character, see also: KECSKÉS, József (1966): *Pozsonyi úti évek és emlékek*. In: *Református Egyház*. 18, 7–8. 151.

²⁴ See more in: LÁNYI, Gábor (2021a): *Sebestyén Jenő (1884–1950) és a történelmi kálvinizmus*. In: Petrás, Éva (ed.): *A 20. századi magyar protestáns közéletiség arcképcsarnoka*. Budapest, Barankovics István Alapítvány – Gondolat Kiadó. 13–32.

²⁵ "Integral Calvinism" – see László Ravasz's inaugural address in: KISS, Réka – LÁNYI, Gábor (eds.) (2023): *Ravasz100. Püspöki jelentések*, Budapest, KRE HTK Egyháztörténeti Kutatóintézet – Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület – Kálvin Kiadó. 65.

Élet (1934–1944).²⁶ It was also noticeable that Ravasz felt himself closer to the opinions and representatives of the former *Figyelő* and the home mission trend.²⁷ It was a big fallback for the home mission trend when in 1932 Victor had to leave the Faculty of the Budapest Reformed Theological Academy because of its Director, Sebestyén. Despite his hidden sympathy, Ravasz's balancing church policy, aimed at peace within the church, did not put the representatives of the home mission wing in the forefront against the Historical Calvinists, which must have been a constant frustration for Bereczky, who considered the cause of the home mission movement a top priority. Bereczky must have felt that although he was not completely marginalized, he could not play the role he deserved, and certainly not in terms of church government, for instance.

It can be briefly mentioned that Bereczky was not part of the Reformed mainstream of the time, either in his theological or in his political and social views. While it is true that the Reformed Church's public thinking between the two world wars, and even its political expressions, was more permissive and open to social sensitivity than the secular political establishment of the time, Bereczky's friendship with Zoltán Tildy²⁸ placed his views on politics and society on the left wing of church society. This also created a sense of distance and separateness from the Reformed church elite between the two world wars, a feeling of being misunderstood and ignored.

This incomprehension on behalf of Ravasz's church governance and the gradual spiritual distancing from them (personally from Ravasz, but already at this point from his friend Imre Szabó) may have been catalysed by the events of the German occupation

²⁶ See more in ABLONCZY, Balázs (2006): *A Református Élet* hetilap és a budapesti reformátusság (1934–1944). In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten*. Vol. 2. Budapest, Argumentum. 1211–1229.

²⁷ RAVASZ, László (1992): *Emlékezéseim*. Budapest. 188; See also: KISS, Réka (2014): Identitásépítés a magyar református sajtóban a XX. század első felében. A *Református Figyelő* példája. In: Paál, Vince (ed.): *A sajtó kultúráközvetítő szerepe 1867–1945*. Budapest. 85; KISS, Réka (2006b): Társadalmi kérdések – egyházi válaszok. Muraközy Gyula lelkipásztori tevékenysége. In: Kósa, László (ed.): *Reformátusok Budapesten*. Vol. 1. Budapest, Argumentum. 591–600.

²⁸ Zoltán Tildy's role was emphasized in GOMBOS, Gyula (1992): Szűk esztendőök. In: Gombos, Gyula (ed.): *A történelem balján II*. Budapest, Püski. 19; According to Gyula Muraközy on Tildy, "Bereczky always, perhaps to this day, has always had an almost discipleship-like respect for him." ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/391.

of Hungary from March 1944. It was also through Tildy that Bereczky came into contact with Magyar Front, which had been established as the central organization of the anti-German resistance and became a dominant figure in its ecclesiastical line.²⁹ Although the Ravasz church governance also tried to alleviate the fate of its church members suffering from the consequences of the Antisemitic laws and tried to speak out against the deportations before the Hungarian government, with the limited political pressure and quasi-illegal activity at its disposal, few church officials of similar rank were in as much danger as Bereczky. Unlike Ravasz, Imre Szabó, or Gyula Muraközy, Bereczky later became acquainted with important figures of the Hungarian left wing in the world of resistance, with whom he was drawn into a community of fate by persecution and serious danger for his life. Bereczky saw that he could rely less on his own church leaders in his efforts to save people, and rather relied on the left wing of the resistance. This community of fate could gradually become a partial community of ideas: the positive human experience gained with the left-wing resistance could lead to understanding and even trust in their political views.³⁰

Bereczky's revivalist theological views and the shift to the left in his political affiliations and outlook meant that he entered the post-World War II period defined by a sense of marginalization, exclusion, and incomprehension, marginalized by the ecclesiastical and secular system in power.

2. External factors

2.1. Saving the Church?

We cannot omit from the range of possible motivations the fact that Albert Bereczky's cooperation with the communist party – even at the cost of certain collateral losses – was intended to preserve and spare the church and its members. Bereczky also refers to this in his bishop's report delivered at the first meeting of the General Assembly of the Danubian Reformed Church District on 11 November 1957, held after the events of 1956.

²⁹ KISS 2006a, 605.

³⁰ The seed to this idea in: MAJSAI, Tamás (1994): *Karl Barth és Bereczky Albert levélváltása 1951* (candidate's dissertation). Budapest MTA Kézirattára D/18296. 123.

According to him, the “administrative measures”, like arbitrary pastoral retirements, transfers, and disciplinary cases,³¹ were all meant to “protect some from much more serious harm”,³² by which he meant possible prosecution by the party-state. After the 1989 regime change, Endre Nagy, Bereczky’s son-in-law and longstanding synod official, responded to the renewed criticisms against his father-in-law with the same argument, according to which the serving of the party-state interest, the abolition of missionary organizations, the “administrative measures” saved many churchmen from “going headlong into the wall” under the political conditions of the time and attracted the attention and wrath of the state power.³³ Nagy also pointed out that the Church of the time, and Bereczky as well, were under strong political pressure.³⁴ Even if Bereczky had resigned, he could only have succeeded in “giving way to a more willing partner in the state’s expectations”.³⁵ Although he had had the same fate as the dishonestly convicted Catholic Cardinal József Mindszenty and the Lutheran Bishop Lajos Ordass, it was precisely their example that proved to him that he could not have prevented the party-state from imposing its will.³⁶

³¹ For the history of pastors who suffered undeserved suppression in the Danubian Church District region during the period, see: LÁNYI, Gábor (2020): *Méltatlanul. Háttérbe szorított dunamelléki református lelkészek az 1950-es években*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Egyház és Társadalom Kutatóintézetének Reformáció Öröksége Műhelye – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kar Egyháztörténelmi Kutatóintézet. Another example: Lányi Gábor (2020): “Ecclesiastical Authority Terror”: The Downgrading of the Szigetszentmiklós Reformed Parish to Mission Parish in 1956, In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş–Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvania*. 2020/2. 53–78. DOI:10.24193/subbtref.65.2

³² BERECKZY, Albert (1957): Mérlegretételünk. Püspöki jelentés. In: *Református Egyház*. 9, 16. 355.

³³ NAGY, Endre (1994): A Budapest-Pozsonyi úti „Hálaadás” templomának lelkésze Bereczky Albert mint egyházkormányzó. In: *Confessio*. 15, 4. 108.

³⁴ Bereczky himself made reference to his limited options: “Nobody claims that this path was flawless. Nor does anyone claim that it was easy. But it is true that there was only one path open to the Church here and now: the narrow road of obedience in faith.” BERECKZY, Albert (1980): *Teológiai gondolkodásunk útjáról*. In: Bereczky, Albert: *Hálaadás. Igehirdetések, előadások, cikkek, tanulmányok*. Budapest, Református Zsinat Iroda Sajtóosztálya. 146.

³⁵ Here Nagy presumably refers to Dean Sándor Fekete or Bishop János Péter: NAGY 1994, 109.

³⁶ Let us not forget that László Ravasz was rather “clever than strong”, as he did not take on an open confrontation with the party-state but apparently retired voluntarily. See more in: Lányi, Gábor (2023): „Inkább okos voltam, mint erős”. Ravasz László lemondásának körülményei (1948).

The most critical actions of Bereczky's activities as a church leader seem to contradict his hidden, church-saving motivation, namely that he often went the extra mile to meet the demands of the single-party state. Such was the case, for example, when in July 1951 he approved the dissolution of the theological academies of Sárospatak and Pápa by merging them with the academies in Budapest and Debrecen for financial reasons³⁷ or when, in the summer of 1952, he passed on three of the four high schools left by the 1948 Agreement to the state, keeping only the high school in Debrecen in church ownership. The closure of the two ancient theological academies led Karl Barth, who had supported Bereczky's election in 1948, to protest. In a letter dated 16 September 1951, published in the West despite his intentions, the renowned Basel-based theologian, who by then had already earned worldwide respect, drew a parallel between the Deutsche Christen movement in Nazi Germany and the church policy of the Bereczky leadership: "And then I ask myself: is there no other way for the Hungarian Reformed than to be in one hundred percent concordance with the ruling regime every time?"³⁸

A noteworthy motivation in connection with the analysis of this "church-saving" action is a notation by Bereczky, dated 19 July 1953, which was not made public, in which he saw his church policy as justified also after the appointment of Imre Nagy as Prime Minister that led to political thaw:

In: Lányi, Gábor – Kiss, Réka (eds.): *Ravasz100. Püspöki jelentések*. Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kar Egyháztörténeti Kutatóintézet – Kálvin Kiadó. 49–52.

³⁷ LADÁNYI, Sándor (1999): Vázlatos történelmi áttekintés a Magyarországi Református Egyház közelebbi múltjának alakulásáról. In Barcza, József – Dienes, Dénes (eds.): *A Magyarországi Református Egyház története 1918–1990. Tanulmányok*. Sárospatak. 131.

³⁸ „Und dann frage mich: Geht es denn im reformierten Ungarn gar nicht anders als jedesmal in so hundertprozentiger Konkordanz mit dem jeweils herrschenden Regime?” For the circumstances under which the letter and the reply were written, see: ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/261–278, 16.09.1951. Barth's letter, the German original, and the Hungarian translation; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/299–313: Bereczky's reply draft; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/314–318: Imre Kádár's draft letter; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/319: Report on Barth's letter and the two reply drafts out of which Kádár's was sent; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/335–337: 16.10.1951. Report: the General Convention convened to tackle Barth's letter; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/344–357: 10.11.1951. Report: Bereczky apparently accepted Imre Kádár's draft and wrote a third one.

“The ‘way of our Church’ – as I have tried to describe it several times in articles and lectures (see the book *A keskeny út* [The Narrow Path]) – I considered it essentially a good and obedient way. *I still think so today. We are not going down this road out of ‘need’ /.../, and not out of ‘church rescue’ opportunism.* Nor is it cowardice – I say this with fear and trembling, for Jeremiah has long and often taught us that the heart is deceitful above all things...” I do believe that the path of “obedience to the faith” is and has been the path of the Hungarian Reformed Church.³⁹

2.2. Susceptibility to Blackmail

In addition to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational possibilities already examined above, I believe that Bereczky’s network of Smallholders’ Party (*Kisgazdapárt*) contacts, his close friendship with and family ties to the convicted members of the Hungarian Brotherhood (Magyar Testvéri Közösség), his deep friendship and close kinship with Zoltán Tildy made him susceptible to blackmail and thus controllable for the communists. The statement by László Pap, Dean of the Budapest Reformed Theological Academy and Deputy Bishop of the Danubian Reformed Church District, is significant in this sense: “I knew what Bereczky, as member of the Smallholders’ Party, thought of the communists, and what I knew I had no doubt that the communists knew, too. /.../ That is why I did not consider Bereczky a suitable person because I was afraid that he would have to make concessions for this political burden in the church.”⁴⁰

In the first post-war parliamentary election the Smallholders’ Party won a decisive victory with 57% of the votes, while the Hungarian Communist Party led by Mátyás Rákosi got only 17%. Even so, the Soviet occupiers pressured the Smallholders to form a coalition with the communists. Zoltán Tildy, member of the Smallholders’ Party, was

³⁹ [emphasis mine] BERECKZY, Albert (1984): *Önvizsgálatunk – főleg hiányai és hibái* (published by: Victorné Bereczky Piroska). In: *Ráday Gyűjtemény évkönyve III*. Budapest. 307.

⁴⁰ An evocative scene in many ways was the case when Bereczky was in Miskolc at the end of 1952, staying at Korona Hotel, and the drunken János Péter and Roland Kiss came banging on his door at night, shouting, “This is the ÁVO, open the door!” (ÁVO – *Államvédelmi Hatóság* [State Protection Authority]) in order to play a trick on him. Bereczky’s frightened reaction shows that he lived in constant fear that the authorities might come for him. PAP, László (1992): *Tíz év és ami utána következett 1945–1963*. Bern, EPMSZ. 90.

the Prime Minister (from 15 November 1945), and then, following the transition from kingdom to republic (1 February 1946), he became President, but the ministries of strategic importance, such as the ministries of the interior and finance, were given to the communists under pressure by Moscow. The communists worked together ingeniously with the Soviet occupiers to liquidate the Smallholders' Party.

Through Tildy, Bereczky engaged in a more open and active secular political activity than before. In early 1945, he joined the Smallholders' Party; from April 1945, he became member of the National Assembly. From May 1945 to June 1946, he was State Secretary in the Ministry of Religion and Public Education.⁴¹ In 1946, he became chairman of the National Assembly's Committee for Foreign Affairs and repeatedly spoke out in defence of Hungarians in Upper Hungary (*Felvidék*) and Transylvania.⁴² From the autumn of 1947, he was elected member of the top leadership of the Smallholders' Party and from 12 September 1947 to 17 April 1948 member of its political committee.⁴³ László Ravasz recalled this period of Bereczky's life as follows: "Bereczky's blessed charisma as a preacher, his extraordinary pastoral skills, his synthetic and balancing power, and the very good relationship with Tildy placed him at the forefront after the war, gave him great influence and gave him exceptional importance in the Hungarian public life."⁴⁴

While Bereczky's political career was on the rise within the Smallholders' Party the Hungarian communists divided and destroyed their coalition partner. Their goal was achieved by a series of manipulated show-trials among which the so-called Hungarian Brotherhood lawsuit became the most significant. The secret society called the Hungarian Brotherhood was already operating in Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon that ended World War I, and its aim was to assert Hungarian national sovereignty and to uplift the marginalized. It is interesting that they did it with surprising openness for a secret society

⁴¹ BEREZKY, Albert (1977): Why Did I Become Secretary of State? Circular Letter to Reformed and Lutheran Pastors. 27 September 1945. In: Bereczky, Albert *Két ítélet között II*. Budapest. 232; Kiss 2006a, 606; SZABÓ IMRÉNÉ SZABÓ 2001, 126.

⁴² LADÁNYI 1994, 28.

⁴³ He was also member of the board of the Hungarian–Soviet Cultural Society in 1945–46, member of the presidential council of the Hungarian–Yugoslav Society, and in 1946 Chairman of the Social Reconciliation Council for Hungarian–Jewish Reconciliation. KISS 2006a, 606.

⁴⁴ RAVASZ 1992, 320.

of the time: they did not advocate any exclusivity either socially or from a religious point of view (they had Israelite members, which also disproves the anti-Semitic accusation levelled against them by the communists) and did not even consistently enforce the condition of Hungarian origin. Their members represented the whole political spectrum, from the far right to communism. However, only men were allowed to become members. There were around 3,000, mostly from the intellectuals of Budapest, many of them working in public administration, public offices or banks. After the German invasion of Hungary (19 March 1944), the organization “went into hibernation”⁴⁵ and ceased its official activities, but many of its members, using the network of contacts they had built up in the organization, were involved in the resistance and in the rescue of the politically persecuted and the Jews. After the war, although its revival was not announced, a new “Steering Committee” was set up.⁴⁶ The Hungarian Brotherhood had many Smallholders’ Party members, and many of them held leading positions in the party.

In January 1947, the communists arrested eight Smallholders’ Party politicians on charges that, as members of the Hungarian Brotherhood, they were preparing an armed conspiracy to overthrow the Hungarian Republic and restore the Horthy regime. In the following months, 260 people were imprisoned and 2,450 people were registered by the state security as participants in the conspiracy. Many were compelled to testify against others by forced confession, while others fled to escape possible false prosecution. In all, seven trials were held against 229 defendants, resulting in death by hanging for three of the alleged leaders, and one year to life imprisonment for the others. After the trial of the Hungarian Brotherhood, the communists used blackmail, intimidation, new trumped-up charges and show trials to have Smallholders’ Party members imprisoned, forced them to emigrate or convert, and significantly weakened the political power of the party, dividing their mass base and paving the way for their takeover in 1948.⁴⁷

These so-called “salami tactics” of Rákosi got to Tildy in July 1948. Tildy’s son-in-law, Viktor Csornoky, the Hungarian ambassador to Cairo, was arrested on trumped-up

⁴⁵ SZEKÉR, Nóra (2009): *A Magyar Közösség története*. Doctoral thesis. Budapest, PPKE. 90. <https://mek.oszk.hu/08400/08480/08480.pdf> (accessed on: 30 September 2023).

⁴⁶ Op. cit. 142.

⁴⁷ KÖBEL, Szilvia (2015): „*Oszd meg és uralkodj!*” *A pártállam és az egyházak*. Budapest, Rejtjel Kiadó.

charges of treason and espionage and executed after a show trial. Thus compromised, Tildy was forced to resign from state presidency, being later put under house arrest from August 1948 until May 1956, his political weight having been done away with completely.

Obviously, Bereczky was also compromised by the annihilation of his relative, confidant, and political sponsor, Tildy. In Bereczky's case, however, the state seems to have used this not to cast him aside but to use and control him: "This is why I did not consider Bereczky to be a suitable person, as I feared that he would have to make concessions in the church for this political burden"⁴⁸ – we can recall László Pap's situational awareness.

State security also considered Albert Bereczky a member of the Hungarian Brotherhood. The state security documents on Bereczky also clearly reflect the reservations and distrust of the state authorities regarding him. The state security services opened a personal file on Bereczky rather late, on 12 June 1950 because of his activities as a bishop, which also contained previously dated documents on him.⁴⁹ He first came to the attention of state security as a state secretary in the Ministry of Culture, which at the time regarded him as an "anti-democratic" reactionary.⁵⁰

Reports written by several of his senior staff members, but also by his driver, revealed his extensive right-wing connections with emigrants⁵¹ and his relations with the sentenced members of the Hungarian Brotherhood,⁵² his interventions for the political prisoners⁵³ as well as for the displaced.⁵⁴ According to a report written in the

⁴⁸ PAP 1992, 90.

⁴⁹ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047, 1. 12 June 1950.

⁵⁰ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047, 61. 22 March 1946.

⁵¹ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047, 236–250. Report "Bereczky and the emigrants".

⁵² ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 79. 22 January 1952. Report on Bereczky's relations with the former "Hungarian Community" member István Tóth, a former general; Bereczky is a "participant and supporter of undermining actions".

⁵³ See ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047. 59–60. 22 September 1949. Letter from Pastor Béla Gönczy Nagy to Bereczky, thanking him for his intercession in freeing him; ÁBTL O-9047 164. 26 January 1951. Report in which János Horváth, a former member of the Smallholders' Party, says he owes his release to Bereczky; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1, 332. 27 September 1952. Béla Elek's thank-you letter to Bereczky, who, according to him, had intervened to have him released; according to László Pap, in May 1956, Bereczky also arranged for Zoltán Tildy's release from police custody. PAP 1992, 139.

⁵⁴ For example, Count László Teleki, Ferenc Zsindely and his family, Sándor Makkai Jr.

summer of 1951, “his actions are the opposite of what he claims”, and “he is trying to place some people of the former regime in positions within the church.”⁵⁵ In 1952, he is described as “he is a participant and supporter of the undermining actions”⁵⁶ or, in principle, as someone who does not identify with the reactionaries but offers them help.⁵⁷ The reports by Roland Kiss, the chief elder of the Danubian Reformed Church District and lay president of the synod also contributed to the construction of this suspicious image. Although Kiss was not among the most committed supporters of Bereczky’s main rival for the supreme control of the church, Bishop János Péter of Debrecen, he was nevertheless fond of stirring up distrust towards Bereczky.⁵⁸

In my opinion, Bereczky’s alignment with state policy, his willingness to follow state intentions and demands, may be primarily due to this political blackmail. Because of his involvement in the Smallholders’ Party and his many personal connections with the members of the Hungarian Brotherhood and his ties to Tildy, he could have understood without any serious indication that if he had not wanted to end up under house arrest in the best-case scenario or even be subject to a show trial with more serious consequences, he had to develop a kind of cooperative *modus vivendi* with the communist regime.

3. Summary

Analysing Bereczky’s possible motivations, we can state that – apart from many other elements that obviously remain hidden from research – all the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations listed above may have influenced Bereczky to give way to the party-state policy that weakened the Church⁵⁹ precisely through the Church itself, during his office. In my opinion, his alignment with the single-party state’s intentions was mainly

⁵⁵ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047. 232–233. 13 June 1951.

⁵⁶ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 79. 22 January 1952.

⁵⁷ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 81. 5 February 1952.

⁵⁸ ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 128. 22 June 1952. Roland Kiss reports that Bereczky “always comes to the defence of such reactionaries”; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 118. 5 May 1952. Roland Kiss reports that Bereczky is using the charitable institutions to support the displaced, with the help of István P. Tóth, head of the institutions; ÁBTL – 3.1.5. – O – 9047/1. 155. 24 September 1952. Roland Kiss reports that Bereczky likes to talk to foreign guests in private.

⁵⁹ RAVASZ 1992, 107.

due to his susceptibility to blackmail and compromising nature. But there is also the indisputable role of internal factors, his ambition and desire to assert himself, stemming from his origins and the deprivation of his mother's family, which, because of his theological and political line, could not be fulfilled during the two world wars, but which led him to take the necessary steps to gain power⁶⁰ and make the necessary compromises to maintain his position. Gyula Gombos's assertion about Bereczky's church policy measures can perhaps also be applied to the episcopal phase of Bereczky's life: he "sacrificed the important for the unimportant, the inner mission for the outer appearance, the wine for the wineskin, and the heritage for a bowl of lentils."⁶¹

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⁶⁰ See: KISS 2006a, 607–611; LÁNYI 2023, 50–51.

⁶¹ GOMBOS 1992, 38.

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