

VERITAS DIRECTOR SANDOR SZAKALY: “IDEAS OF HISTORY CONSTANTLY EVOLVE, CHANGE”

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“I DO NOT THINK OF MYSELF AS AN INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED HISTORIAN OF EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY. REGARDLESS OF WHETHER OR NOT I AM LIKED, I AM CONSIDERED AMONG THE BEST IN MY OWN NARROWER RESEARCH AREA . . . IF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION EXISTS, THEN I CAN ARTICULATE MY OWN VIEWPOINT ON THIS ISSUE JUST LIKE ANYBODY ELSE, WHICH I DO NOT EXPECT OTHERS TO ACCEPT. . . IF WE PUT HISTORICAL QUESTIONS ON A POLITICAL TRACK AND MAKE COURT CASES OUT OF THEM, IT IS NOT BENEFICIAL.” –

Sandor Szakaly, director, Veritas Historical Research Institute

Prior to 2013 Sandor Szakaly was known as an expert on the military history of Hungary in the Second World War. After being appointed director of the new Veritas Historical Research Institute at the beginning of 2014, founded on special request by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, he became widely known for his controversial comments about anti-Jewish policies during Horthy-era Hungary. The Budapest Beacon asked Szakály about his experience and historical credo, his evaluation of Horthy-era Hungary as well as about the Veritas institute itself.

Budapest Beacon: How did you start to deal with history?

Sandor Szakaly: I was born and raised in Törökkoppány, a small Hungarian village. My grandfather was a shoemaker who, in spite of his elementary education, was a terrific storyteller. This is why I started to get interested in history early on. When I started my studies at ELTE University in Budapest, I also became a member of the renowned Eötvös Kollégium – that now once again bears the name *Eötvös Collegium* – that was founded in the 1890s as the Hungarian counterpart to the French *École Normale Supérieure*. Even though the latter was not the same as it had been in the 1930s and 1940s, it had a definite appeal and remained a really important intellectual think-tank during the 1970s and 1980s. There were many topics into which one could gain insight at *Eötvös Collegium* that you would not necessarily have dealt with at the university.

My interest was more or less clear from early on. At first, I told my future supervisor, Gyula Vargyai, who later became a professor and “renounced” me several years ago as his disciple, which I very much regret, that I would like to write my thesis on Hungarian civil anti-fascist resistance and Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky. Vargyai discouraged me from choosing such a politically problematic topic (it was 1977) and suggested I instead write about the history of the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie. This was a novelty as nobody else had dealt with this topic before. So I started to do research on this topic. I also began to frequent the Institute of Military History of the Hungarian People’s Army. This was the institute whose job offer I accepted in addition to two others after my graduation in 1980.



BB: This is a period in Hungarian historiography characterized by rethinking the Second World War history of the country?

S. Sz: Exactly. Books on economic history by Ivan T. Berend, the monograph of György Ránki on the Second World War in Hungary – all used archival material from the Horthy era that had not yet been processed. Of course Berend and Ránki had much more freedom as prominent historians in this case. I published a couple of important articles on the topic myself in *Valóság* and *Élet és Irodalom*, which were considered to be the most essential journals in public life. I also have a good relationship to this day with oral historian Gábor Hanák who made it possible for me to make interviews with several former professional officers of the Hungarian Royal Army for the Video Collection of Historical Interviews at the National Széchényi Library. I was the only one, for example, who was able to record the life story of Ernő Gömbös, the son of Gyula Gömbös (Fascist prime minister of Hungary between 1932-1936). He also was an adjutant of Ferenc Szálasi after 15-16 October 1944, living in Austria after the war. It is a valuable historical source. As a historian I think to this day, as

opposed to many others, that one should rely first and foremost on archival sources and written correspondence when conducting historical research. This can be complemented by oral history or press materials. But the focus should be on the former and archival material needs to be referred to as accurately as possible.

Naturally, I often experienced pressure from the Kádár regime. However, I was only ever obliged to write one article. I was asked to write a major chapter for a book about Transylvanian Communist and later Soviet partisan Gyula Rácz. I struggled with it for lack of good sources but eventually I submitted my study. This book was never published as none of the other contributors managed to submit their articles. Years later, my chapter appeared in a shortened version as a brochure.

Early in 1985 I was reported as an “anti-Semite” because in an article I disagreed with the interpretation that later members of the Hungarian anti-Nazi military resistance did not leave the army around 1939-41 due to their “anticipating the spread of Fascism”. I argued that they needed to leave their posts because after the anti-Jewish laws they became stigmatized and did not see a future in the military.

BB.: You mentioned that you regard archival sources as most important during your work. How much archival material from abroad could you access in the 1980s? Could you work with German, American or Soviet archives?

S. Sz.: Access to Western archives was mostly the privilege of the well-established, prepared and politically trusted Hungarian historians: Ivan T. Berend, György Ránki, Gyula Juhász, Magda Ádám, Elek Karsai. Only once did I win a scholarship to research archives in Vienna for four months. For my research topic – the Hungarian military elite between 1919 and 1945 – the Vienna archives were perfectly sufficient.

Of course, I was aware of works on the topic by István Deák and many other prominent Western historians, whose contributions vastly exceed my own. I do not think of myself as an internationally renowned historian with exceptional ability. Regardless of whether or not I am liked, I am considered among the best in my own narrower research area. I had an exceptionally good relationship with István Deák. He eternally resents the fact that his father’s appreciation and social status, gained by fighting valiantly during the First World War as a reserve officer of the Austro-Hungarian Army, completely disappeared after the Nazi occupation and anti-Jewish laws. Yet many examples show that exclusion and denouncement of Jewish brothers-in-arms was not a typical and general phenomenon in Horthy’s army corps.

BB: In a recent interview you claimed in connection with anti-Jewish legislation of 1938-41 that the security of Hungarian Jews’ life and property was ensured before the Nazi occupation of 19 March 1944. On what basis do you justify such claims? Racial anti-Jewish laws and the 1942 law on confiscation of “Jewish land and forests” do not suggest such an interpretation.

S. Sz.: I never claimed that there was no discrimination whatsoever under the Horthy era. I recently came under the crossfire of an attack for my comments on deportations of Jews from Hungary to Kaminits-Podilskiy in 1941. I stated that the expulsion of Jews without Hungarian citizenship, or with a disputed status, happened on the basis of an immigration procedure

regulated by a law in 1903, because this is the legal argumentation. People responsible for the Novi Sad massacre of 1942, in which several hundreds of local Serbs and Jews were executed by Hungarian Military Gendarmerie, were prosecuted and sentenced by Hungarian military judges in 1943-44.

I have to note as well that anti-Jewish laws were not abided in all places. For example, in my village the Jewish shopkeeper was operating until the summer of 1944. If somebody claims that the Gendarmerie did not take part in the 1944 deportations, he is lying. If the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie was ordered to take part in deportations, then they would do exactly that. In my opinion, no one really knew what fate deportees would face, and the Jewish Councils established on orders from the German occupiers were all hopeful. They cooperated with occupiers and Hungarian administration as they had no other choice. I am not saying this to blur responsibility, of course, as Hungarian authorities were collaborating with the occupiers in the implementation of the deprivation of rights. Yet Hungarian Jews together with their leaders were forced to acknowledge this situation, and proceeded with deportations without serious resistance.

BB: When do you think was the first time Governor Horthy heard about the Final Solution?

S.Sz.: As far as I know, Horthy was not aware of it until the summer of 1944. Gendarmerie is equivocally condemned for deportations but I myself refuse to accept the principle of collective guilt. Not many people are aware of the fact, for example, that following the Arrow Cross coup in October 1944, the Swedish Embassy in Budapest was protected by gendarmes, who occasionally even chased away Arrow Cross militia searching for hidden Jews. I like to separate the issue of guilt and responsibility. Horthy and the Hungarian political elite, but even Hungarian Jewish leaders – as far as I can tell – were only informed about what we today call the Holocaust in the summer of 1944. Upon hearing about it, Horthy made steps to stop the deportations, thus saving the Jews of Budapest. Anyway, if not even Churchill and Roosevelt were aware of the gas chambers, how could Horthy have known? Or if Churchill and Roosevelt knew, why did they remain idle?

BB: By way of summary, how would you evaluate the Horthy regime, meaning the period between 1920 and 1945, as a historian?

S. Sz.: I think that the period between 1920 and 1945 – we do not talk about a separate Horthy regime, only a Horthy era – together with its many mistakes, brought about several positive changes in Hungarian society. In a sense it meant a process of democratization. The country's economic life was developing. In the background of this, of course, there were loans from the West that were controlled by Jeremiah Smith Jr., an American attorney. During the larger part of the time of the 1920s almost no decision could be made without consulting Jeremiah Smith Jr.

In the 1930s, after the Great Depression, the Arrow Cross party raised many existing social problems, and as historian Zoltán Paksy emphasized in his recent book, their political program appealed to the masses. They enjoyed genuine support. Horthy's governments needed to restrict them with administrative measures. Concerning the 1920 *numerus clausus* law, often referred to as the "First Jewish Law of Europe", the term "Jew" is not mentioned in the text: it was referring to all the national minorities. Oszkár Jászi, a civic radical politician

and a minister during Mihály Károlyi's revolution, already wrote about proportionate representation of national minorities in society as early as the 1910s.

Hungarian Jews, as in all societies, were divided in Horthy-era Hungary as well. Yet Jews regarded Hungary as their homeland, and this is exactly why the German occupation of Hungary in 1944 was a tragedy. Anti-Jewish legislation seriously violated the principle of the equality of citizens even before the occupation. However, I do not regard these as infringements of the security of private property and life. This was the same situation as before the deportation of ethnic Germans from Hungary in 1946. If freedom of expression exists, then I can articulate my own viewpoint on this issue just like anybody else, which I do not expect others to accept.

BB: Is there such an expression as responsibility of the state according to you? Do you see any kind of consensus in the country on this issue?

S. Sz.: I think that concerning national memory, serious intellectual fights broke out after 1989. Historians were also automatically labelled as either a rightist or a leftist. A sort of a consensus was about to formulate around the end of the nineties, meaning that even if we did not accept each other's opinion, we respected it and acknowledged it as different but still valid. This has once again changed recently. If we put historical questions on a political track and make court cases out of them, it is not beneficial. I still hold the view that the state is a simple sum of individuals having their personal responsibility. In this sense, Horthy and his circle bear responsibility for what happened but the state in itself does not.

BB: What about diverting political questions towards a historical interpretation? I mean parallels you made between anti-Lázár protests and Bolshevism.

S. Sz.: I was honestly surprised about the fact that you can actually apply for money to protest. Revolutions can be paid for by other states as well, just as the 1917 Russian Revolution was paid for by Germany. I did not intend to draw parallels between anti-Lázár protesters and Bolsheviks, but in general I deem the practice of applying for funding unethical. In the US foundations are providing the funding. In Hungary foundations apply for funding. This strikes me as an odd practice.

BB: In Hungary, anti-Semitism and rising social tensions represent a serious problem. Why do you think that in times like this the state would appoint somebody like you to lead the institute?

S. Sz.: I do not know what the connection between social tensions and the leadership of Veritas Historical Institute would be. Why was I appointed? Surely because my application and previous professional experience made me seem capable for this job. Concerning anti-Semitism, I myself think that this accusation is used too freely and frequently. If somebody says that "Sándor Szakály is an idiot" – I presume, there are several people holding this view – it is an opinion. However, when historian Tamás Krausz accused me of Holocaust denial, it is hardly an opinion any more. This is why we have an ongoing court procedure in this case. We still do not have a final judgment but naturally I reckon both of us think that they are right.

BB: Veritas Historical Research Institute is subordinate to the Prime Minister's Office, operates using public funds and its declared mission statement is to reformulate historical memory. Do you not think that this can be characterized as the construction of an ideology?

S. Sz.: I will say the same thing now as before: I do not see any such expectation, as you put it, in connection with the institute. Hungarian historiography's basic ideas, which were formulated in the 1950s to 1970s and are present to this day, need to be partially reviewed, of course, and this is one of our objectives. Ideas of history constantly evolve, change. However I have not been entrusted with an ideological mission.

BB: If an institute uses public money, then accountability and transparency are required. This is why I think many people called attention to the fact that you don't even have a webpage.

S. Sz.: I am not concealing all this information. You will soon see it. Every employee here is obliged to prepare an asset declaration. Our webpage will soon be online; all public data will be available there. Honest and good web developers are working on it at the moment. When somebody wrote me asking about mine and my co-leader's salaries, I immediately provided him the adequate information. However, when I was confronted with enquiries about the costs of our conference about the Opposition Roundtable of 1989, I merely answered that no public money was used to organize this event, which is true. It might also come as surprising that the whole cost of designing our corporate identity was HUF 200,000 (USD 920).

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