

ZENIT: How important were his relationships with successive US presidents, in view of the fact that only two replied to him in writing?

Zinner: The fact that only two presidents replied to his letters sent to Washington does not necessarily mean that his one-sided correspondence was useless and he lived at the American Embassy just as a historian as he liked to refer to himself. His letters to the presidents and state secretaries of the United States were read, assessed, and made use of by people working on different levels of the American administration. His writings could give them an insight into the life of contemporary Hungary even though he sometimes reacted to false rumors. It was especially in the first years of his "semi-captivity," at the time of the Kádarian reprisals, that he bombarded the Americans with the horrible details and data of this process in order to urge them to take steps in the interest of the persecuted and imprisoned people and attain an amnesty for them. The effectiveness of his letters is still to be studied in order to ascertain his actual contribution to the preparation of the American diplomats for the Hungarian-American clandestine talks later on.

ZENIT: How did you discover his letters?

Zinner: The letters published in Hungarian in 2010 and in English in 2013 have been found by Somorjai Ádám OSB, my co-author in both books. It is his devotional research in four presidential archives and in the archives of the State Department back in the USA that made these letters available to me, and made the publication of these books possible. Our friendship and professional cooperation started nearly 10 years ago when Reverend Somorjai came to Hungary in connection with the future beatification of József Mindszenty. The present volume is another result of our joint efforts in research and historiography. Some letters by the cardinal were quoted already in our book Majd' halálra ítélve. Dokumentumok Mindszenty József és társai élettörténetéhez (CD melléklettel) [Almost sentenced to death. Documents to the biography of Mindszenty József and his companions (with CD)] in 2008.

ZENIT: What do the letters tell us about the cardinal's courage and wisdom?

Zinner: Paradoxically, the cardinal was safe in his country in his semi-captivity. He paid a high price for his safety as no one outside the walls of the embassy took notice of him, his letters remaining unknown to the public either at home or abroad. The Americans took care of that, for they did not want to become involved in diplomatic difficulties. Although the cardinal spoke in his letters for his beloved nation subdued once again and also for the people of other "captive nations," calling attention to their sad predicament, nobody knew of his efforts. Despite the short oral acknowledgements he received as replies to his letters, he kept bombarding the American establishment with his writings, the ardor of which was sometimes due to the Hungarian tragedy of the dictated peace of Trianon. We think that Mindszenty's courage lay in his justified criticism even of his host, the USA, for not observing the Wilsonian principles after World War I and the Atlantic Charter after World War II, as well as for the misleading news of Radio Free Europe during the events of 1956.

The documents found in the US introduce the cardinal as a freedom-fighter. He fought bitterly also with the Americans for the publication of his memoirs, in order to be able to tell the world his own version of the truth. ...His memoirs suffer from lack of precise information but are still a report of the period by an important person. On Dec. 29, 1948, American Ambassador in Budapest Selden Chapin wrote to the secretary of state about the international protest following the Cardinal's arrest, saying (retranslated from Hungarian): "Mindszenty's case should not be treated as an isolated example of the violation of human rights but should be linked with all forms of persecution in order to make his arrest a symbol of crushing human rights. Mindszenty's case is particularly fortunate to be used for this purpose in Eastern Europe as common persons of every denomination whose abstract thinking is greatly restricted to a symbolic presentation of concrete persons and events have always regarded the cardinal as the primary symbol of the western ideas of freedom and of Christian values."

ZENIT: What lessons can we learn from him today?

Zinner: Chapin was right, but the world had changed by the autumn of 1956. It took a week after the beginning of the revolution for patriots of Felsőpetény and from other parts of the country to remember the cardinal in his house arrest. No one among the political elite or the responsible figures of the day did so. However, these people did not forget the Roman Catholic Primate of Hungary in 1945-48 despite years of degrading propaganda and two severe judgements leading to his imprisonment – the man who was to write 117 letters to American presidents and leading diplomats between Nov. 4, 1956, and late July 1971, the man who, having read in the Hungarian and international press about the horrors of the Kádarian reprisals did not fail to give voice to his protest. In almost all of his 63 letters sent to Washington before the general amnesty of late March 1963, he urged for intervention in the interest of the persecuted.

Finally, let me quote a characteristic passage from a letter by Cardinal Mindszenty to President Eisenhower, written on June 23, 1960, in his gilded cage on the Budapest Szabadság (Freedom) Square: "Today nothing is more important (and perhaps it is not too late) for mankind than that its leaders and the led should learn what bolshevism is in the way that we, its poor, wretched satellites have experienced in body and soul. This great lesson can equal the Declaration of Independence in its effect. ..."

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