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Short films remembering the Galley Slaves

Abstract

In the years of 2020–2021 I made a few short films with some people – one tourist organizer and four preachers – who have found it important to preserve the memory of Hungarian galley slaves. In this report, I would like to show the responsibility, respect and love that the commemorators had for their ancestors, which spirit of this activity was also radiated to me.

Keywords: commemoration, Bálint Kocsi Csergő, wreath at the Memorial of the Galley Slaves (1991)

You are as often as not fed up with plaques. As if you'd prefer bygone times to the present. As if you'd care more for furnishing the memorial corner of our ancestors rather than making yourself at home in your own house. There is hardly any free space on the walls of church buildings for a newly discovered historical hero, except for the memorials of galley slaves. Just look at the lanky figure of teacher Bálint Kocsi Csergő as he is gazing into the future at Pápa (Reformed school town in West Hungary), full of energy. This memorial is a witness to a brave standing by a cause of both religion and politics. Still, there were men who, after suffering a brutal captivity, changed their faith!

It is perhaps this shaking in some peoples' faith that confirms us in appreciating the values of the galley-slave preachers. The attitude towards life of those people might suggest some resemblance to our age. Sure enough,

there were a handful of men who chose galley slavery rather than giving up their religious conviction. This was not just a religion, a religious conviction, it was a firm belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ, a motivation that is evident from the recollections of galley slaves. Another chief motive in this story was an absolute confidence in innocence, also parallel with the trial of Jesus. This spiritual attitude reveals for us the power of faith: there were and will ever be men who are seeking for a heavenly, rather than an earthly home.



Bálint Kocsi Csergő Csergő, the author of the story of the galley preachers, was born in Kocs, Transdanubia. It was here that the chalice was made in 1679, after the deliverance, and it is still used by the first confessors to take communion.

This atmosphere and mentality led me to make a few short films upon the request of Dávid Csorba for those who have found it important to preserve the memory of galley slaves.¹ Cameraman Ágoston Fehér came to help me both mentally and as a copartner.²

Our first journey proved to be particularly important. Júlia Fábián as a pensioner happened to start a movement representing a tour for our National Heritage within the Club Vasas with the intention of visiting all the localities in connection with the Protestant galley slaves. Júlia Fábián's

faith, stubbornness, striving and persistence was really embarrassing. What a man or woman can do for a cause, she did it in her nineties, handing it down to the younger generations, smiling and enthusiastically.



A copperplate engraving of the reception of the Hungarian galleys in Zurich 100 years earlier has been published in the Zurich journal Chorherren (1785).

Our second journey found us at Ács. Perhaps the most striking out of all galley-slave localities proved to be this particular church and its vicinity. You had the impression as if you'd find these heroes really live. As if the late Reformed Pastor István Komáromi Sülye would have been an actor in the life of our church. It was even under communism that the successors of galley slaves drew strength from Komáromi Sülye's heroism. It was a special occasion as the local minister, Zsolt Gerecsei, told the story of the memorial bell dedicated to the memory of galley slaves. It was rather risky to declare one's adherence to a religious creed in the sixties, still the

donation was so generous that for the 300th anniversary of Komáromi Sülye's release from galley slavery another, a little bit smaller, bell was founded with the preacher's motto engraved: "For God Almighty all unbeaten paths are made beaten." Church members of Ács consider it an imperative not to give in under any circumstances however cruel the bosses are. For, they are convinced that the real values are to be found above, and not down on earth.

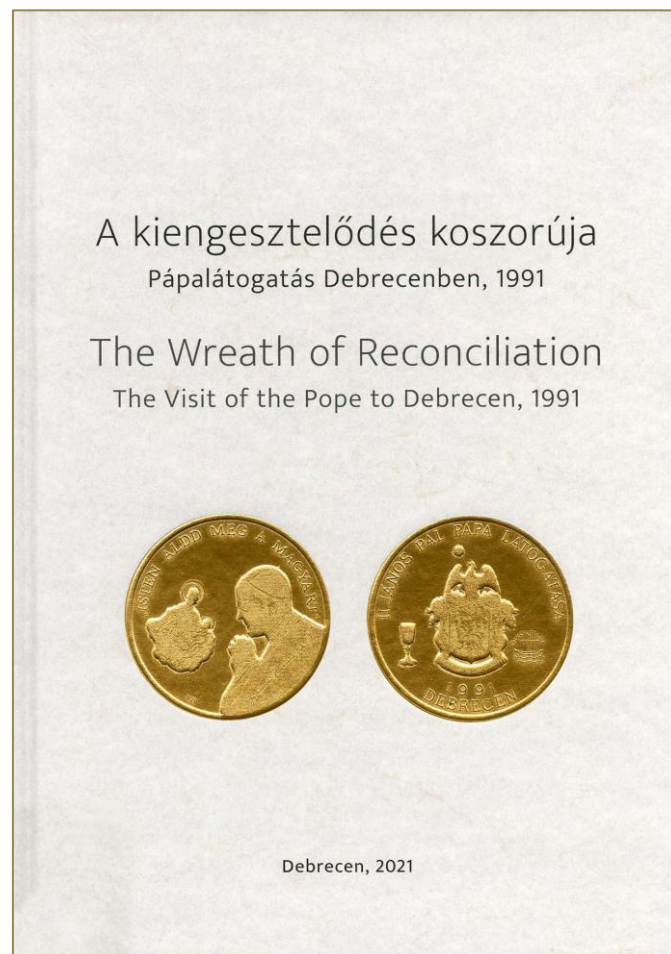
I still remember it clearly when, on our way to Kocs (a historical village which gave the name 'kocsi' which means a 'car' in the Hungarian language) Péter Roboz, the local minister of the Reformed Church, came to welcome us telling his story about Bálint Kocsi Csergő, a famous galley slave coming from Kocs. A small museum forming part of the church building proclaiming the story of a church leader who had been ready to sacrifice his life for his faith. Forty linden trees were planted commemorating the forty galley-slave preachers, forming a small park with benches to make it comfortable to recall the memories of the heroic deeds of the galley slaves.

We discussed this question in details with the Reverend Mihály Márkus, former bishop of the Transdanubian District of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Among others it was Reverend Márkus who proposed to include the symbol of galley slavery in the arms of the Transdanubian Church District. We spoke very highly of the novel *Forty Preachers*³ of the well-known writer, György Moldova, based on the memoranda of Bálint Kocsi Csergő of 1713. It was an obvious parallel with the fate of some Hungarian intellectuals. At the Court of Pozsony 1674 the convicted preachers were offered four options: to convert to the Roman Catholic faith, resign from their office, leave the country in exile, or – the fourth option – death-sentence for high treason. Translating Moldova's four points into the present day: first of all, you should not have an opinion of your own, or if so, you better shut up. Or if you insist on proclaiming your opinion, you better leave the country. If you stick firmly to your opinion, you will be condemned to death. This was a message to posterity.

It was also bishop Márkus who brought up the historical event of the visit in Debrecen of Pope John Paul II on 18th August 1991, who laid a wreath at the Memorial of the Galley Slaves⁴ at the back of the Great Church of Debrecen, in the Memorial Garden.⁵ This was a spontaneous action of the Pope.

We visited Mihály Márkus Jr. in Pápa. As we were climbing from story to story remembering the galley slaves one picture struck my heart. Their

otherwise upright figures in a painting in Zürich were depicted with bent backbone. J.R. Schellenberg in 1785 painted the meeting of the galley slaves with the local notabilities as if the galley slaves were full of gratitude for their release.⁶ It was a heart-rending sight for me to sense the parallel with the feeling in the totalitarian regime in our country how we accepted similarly with full of gratitude Dutch, Swiss and other generous aids that were enough just for survival.



Joint Reformed-Catholic volume to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the papal visit to Debrecen (2021).

Előd Szabó, reformed minister at city of Tata (Western part of Hungary) told me a particularly interesting story. The preacher, cornerstone of their memories, escaped from being a galley slave. János Szenci Száki went into voluntary exile. Instead, it was his son who was tortured to death after a show trial. This was also a case of having the courage of one's convictions. These historical memories confront us with the history of our church in the past where we came from. It confronted me in any case.

Notes

- ¹ Csorba, 'Svájci források.', 166–167.
- ² Fekete, *Gályarabok emlékezete*.
- ³ Moldova, *Negyven prédikátor*.
- ⁴ Fekete & Hapák, *The Wreath*.
- ⁵ The galley slaves statue was erected in Debrecen in 1895, for an initiative of a private person. S. Fazakas, 'Die Erinnerung.', 114–117. Since then became the column the symbol of Hungarian spiritual power, with a half-national, especially reformed identity. S. Bitskey, 'De Ruyter admirális és a magyar irodalom.', 207.
- ⁶ Schellenberg, 'Aufnahme.'; Maurer, 'Die unter Religion vertriebene.', 1–2.

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