

Balázs Botos

Review of the Book Entitled the *Preservation of Values in the 1950's. The Story of Gyurka (György Rozgonyi) and His Youth Movement*

SUMMARY

The “illegal” youth movements that evolved in District XI of Budapest in the 1950's set the objective of preserving the values of the “old tradition” the socialists wished to change: those of the middle-class culture and heritage of Europe. Giving a glance of the activities of these communities, the hidden life of the church, hiking built on scout traditions and the state power's reprisals, the authors' picture and analysis of the period may be of wide interest.

Keywords: György Rozgonyi, church ethos, Catholic youth movement, soviet type dictatorship, 1950's, Budapest

This above-mentioned, recently published book was written by György Rozgonyi, leader of his youth movement in the 1950's and two other members of the group, Gábor Papanek and Gábor Veress. The book gives an overview of the history of a major Catholic youth movement, considered as illegal by the regime of the time, and provides information about the participants' subsequent lives. It is an accurate historical record, recommended not only for those interested in that period, as it reads well and draws the attention to values and experiences that remain valid today.

This community was established in 1952 in the heart of District 11 of Buda-

pest (called Szentimreváros), and was active until 1961, when it was terminated by the government. In the beginning there were five to eight members aged 12–16, but their number quickly increased as a result of Gyurka's efficient organization: within a few years the group had 100, 150 and then 200 members. They were occasionally replaced: older ones left and young teenagers joined, but later on university students also became part of the community. It was not a proper organization as it was unnamed and had no officially established seat. It did not develop a hierarchy, and its leaders did not have titles or set competences and duties (the leaders were called by their first names or nicknames). Throughout the years the movement consisted of small independent groups of five to eight members, led by people who were a few years older, without much interaction between the groups. Nobody has been able to compile a complete list of all the participants' names, not even the State Security Network.

The book begins with a preface by historian Dr Frigyes Kähler, followed by the author's short introduction. The first chapter gives an overview of the historical background, emphasizing that in the late 19th and early 20th century, Szentimreváros developed fast and most of the inhabitants newly settled in the district were intellectuals. Its predominantly Christian middle-class background was first ensured by local chapels, later churches, and then also by educational institutions such as the Technical University of Budapest, the Cistercian Secondary Grammar School and the St Margit Secondary Grammar School. After 1945, this spiritual orientation came into sharp conflict with the new Muscovite govern-

ment's aims and actions taken to gain and maintain power, which often included sending people to forced labour in the Soviet Union, notoriously known as "malenkiy robot" (Russian for "little work"), political assassinations, dismissals or forced retirement for political reasons, internment and deportation. However, these actions of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" triggered general aversion in society, which was further enhanced by the nationalization of well-known high-quality parochial schools, dissolution of the monastic orders teaching in these schools, and the termination of the scouts' movement, which had been doing an excellent job in child training.

The predominant claim made in the next chapters is that the "illegal" youth movements that emerged rapidly in the wake of these power policy endeavours actually set the preservation of the European middle-class culture (in modern terminology: values) as their objective.

– Their priority aim was to familiarize the youth with the two to four thousand years old Judeo-Christian teachings, with focus on the most beautiful Bible stories, the moral principle of "love your neighbour as yourself", and the most important religious ceremonies.

– During their community gatherings (after Bible studies and during short cultural and fun activities, games and discussions around campfires etc.) they inevitably talked about the unspoken essential elements of "erudition" (newly discovered scientific facts, important or new historical knowledge, world-famous works of art – and also the principals of cultured social behaviour).

– As they followed the traditions of scouting, including events such as train-

ing and hiking in small groups led by older teenagers, they could preserve the previously successful educational practice.

– In addition to these values, equality was practiced in the community; and the activities of boys' and girls' groups only differed in minor, specific aspects.

The second chapter is about the formation of large numbers of new youth groups in District 11 of Budapest (similarly to a general trend throughout the country) from the end of the 1940's. Numerous priests, former scoutmasters, teachers and parents joined forces, in spite of persecution, to teach their children the basics of morals and ethics and to ensure that they spend their free time in Christian communities. Young people refused to replace these activities and ideas by the new concept of class warfare and the romanticism of partisanship, instead, they wished to acquire middle-class "erudition" and to experience the adventures of scouting. These communities mushroomed without official approval; some, ignoring the fact that scouting had been prohibited, continued their scouting activities along with teaching divinity and religious values. Others sought to achieve these goals in Indian camps, hiking and cave exploration clubs. In the first years, Catholic Benedictine, Cistercian, Pauline, Piarist and Regnum priests, and Lutheran and Calvinist ministers undertook leadership in these communities. When the religious persecution of priests and clergymen intensified, certain Catholic circles endeavoured to achieve their goals without direct help from the church. In Protestant communities young people were confined within the boundaries of church institutions.

The third chapter is the longest and most important one, as the information about Gyurka's community, unfamiliar for most of the present generation, featured the secret life of the clandestine church, as put by the author of the preface. It is divided into three parts according to the age groups of the participants.

What may be understood as "news" for many people nowadays is that the school curricula for primary schools between the 1st and 8th grades was mainly built on former religious schoolbooks, which focused on famous Biblical stories, life changing events of church history, Catholic liturgy, the presentation of the sacraments, and the basic teachings of ethics. These included the Books of Moses and some of the historical books of the Old Testament, showing God's love for the world he had created and especially for humankind. It was taught that, despite the fact that they had been granted free will, people should behave according to God's will and keep his laws, and those who violate them commit a sin and should expect its consequences. However, it was strongly emphasized, in accordance with the New Testament, that whoever repented of their disobedience would find mercy and forgiveness from God. Learning about the sacraments and church ordinances such as baptism, confirmation, the Holy Mass, confession, the Holy Communion and assistance to the celebrant in a liturgical service were also important parts of the curriculum.

The young tutors, whom the students often shared their problems with, had to prepare thoroughly for teaching these Christian principles, since the smart students often had questions about the conflict with the atheist ideology taught at

schools. At the end, however, these tutors were filled with joy to see their students finally learn these values despite the fact that they would only apply them as adults.

The young tutors, mostly between 16 and 20, also encountered considerable challenges in teaching teenagers using typed texts, jokingly called “holy lettuces”, in addition to schoolbooks. The challenge was not a comparison with the mandatory official, low-quality materialism taught at school at that time, since the latter was easy to exceed, rather the exchange of views with the students interested in “serious” topics, who asked for and read related books, and readily participated in discussions about them. Although the students did not expect infallibility, they would not have tolerated factual ignorance concerning religious topics, such as Biblical names, dates and sites. Teaching Christian ethics and morals had its pitfalls not encountered in secular school education. One such challenge the young teachers faced was helping their teenage students – who were familiar with the practices of the Rákosi and then the Kádár era – understand the strict moral standards set by religion without offending those living with family members who already did not follow these norms. For example, they had to convince these students that telling lies and stealing were unacceptable despite the fact that it was widely practiced everywhere in the state hierarchy and had become increasingly accepted societal norms. They had to address sensitive topics, such as whether not telling the truth to the officers of the State Security Department was a violation of religious or moral principles, if premarital sex or abortion were acceptable, and how to be-

have with those who did not follow these recommended principles.

The authors especially emphasize that the knowledge passed down in Gyurka’s communities was not limited to religious and ethical issues. Students received a wide variety of information about numerous other topics. For instance, relating to creation, they discussed information about astronomy, nuclear physics, biology, while on other occasions, history, literature or art history were discussed. The altar boys’ duties included learning some Latin, occasionally with an outlook on the spiritual background of the texts. The musical culture of the youth was also improved through singing folksongs while they had a rest during hiking and around campfires. Due to the success of the first dance occasion in the early years, similar events were organized later on, and served as opportunities for learning the basics of polite social behaviour. Those who undertook leading roles could also gain experience in leadership and were actually trained in management from the very beginning of the movement.

Hiking, based on scouting traditions, was another fortunate complement to religious education. The participants had the chance to recognize that although (in a myriad of topics) their leaders knew a lot more than they did, yet they endeavoured to expand their knowledge. In addition, as a positive lifetime experience they could see their leaders put the proclaimed principles into practice: during their hikes they represented the community’s interests, gladly took care of the younger ones, undertook to address all the problems faced during the programmes, bore the biggest burdens, and did not expect any advantage in return.

The next years and decades evidence that despite all the difficulties, this community training has been successful. Most of the former participants interviewed in the late 1980's and in 2017–2018 claimed that they had industriously studied the community curriculum and it had a profound effect on their future behaviour and on their whole life (Kamarás, 1992, p. 110, 179).

A unique part of this chapter is the information about the one-time university students' small group. Also called Forum, it consisted of ten to eleven members, who discussed pre-selected topics at their monthly self-study group gatherings. Most often a member – or occasionally an invited outsider – compiled and presented a brief introduction to the subject, and on other occasions they read out short stories and poetry, listened to music, watched slides, or organized visits to theatres and then discussed the parts they considered worthy. The specific topics of the programmes varied greatly, but unfortunately, a full inventory has not been retained. There were hardly any specifically religious programmes. Several members reported on scientific problems in their respective professions. A member working as a physician raised “health” topics several times. Occasionally, issues concerning social sciences were also discussed, and some arts and sports-related gatherings were also successful. All the participants found these meetings useful, as they could increase their knowledge.

Despite the fact that the community made little effort at concealing its activities, it was not until 1958 that its work became a matter of interest for the State Security. From that time on, the participants

were investigated, attempts were made at sending undercover informers to the gatherings and later on, some the participants were approached and requested to act as snitches. At night on February 6, 1961, the homes of several members¹ of the (Catholic) communities considered illegal, including Gyurka, were searched. About 80 people, including Gyurka, and many other leaders and members of similar communities were arrested that night. During the interrogations, most of them were incarcerated on remand. In the months following the mass arrests, additional people were also interrogated and arrested. Those arrested were accused of being involved in the “Black Ravens” conspiracy to illegally organize a “Christian-Socialist bourgeois regime” (Hollós, 1967). Gyurka and his community were accused of being part of this conspiracy by joining the so-called Christian Front (a small group of about 20 supporters, which became a political party in 1956). As physical torture was stopped perhaps in the late 1950s, evidencing the allegations during the investigations and interrogations was unsuccessful despite extreme verbal abuse, inhumane detention conditions, psychological pressure and threats. Nonetheless, the prosecutors insisted on their concepts, the courts indicted a hundred and eighty people in seventeen lawsuits, and eighty-six of them were imprisoned for a term between one and seventeen years (Gyurka was sentenced to three and a half years) and additional eighty people were sentenced to other punishments. Another hundred and eighty indictees were retaliated without any court hearing (Soós, 2017). However, the society did not accept the courts' position already back at that time, and so

most of the rulings were overturned after the change of regime following the fall of the Soviet Union.

The fourth chapter provides information about the fate of the “illegal” groups of the 1950s, particularly Gyurka’s community, after 1961. It also records that most Catholic youth communities terminated their activities in 1961, so in the late Kádár era religious education was limited to the few remaining Catholic schools, and in an extremely low number of communities (small groups gathering in the sacristies of Catholic churches and in various rooms in Protestant churches), which were all kept under surveillance. Gyurka’s community also fell apart. In the following years, the time spent in prison and other state security interventions without court hearing resulted 5–15 years of delay in the careers of many participants. Therefore, by 1990, by the ages of forty to fifty, none of the members had been able to advance beyond middle management positions (and, as a result, they were unable to use the knowledge they had gained in community or in broader social circles). Despite the fact that the “illegal” community activities were terminated in the particular circles, the state security continued to monitor them for a long time (regardless of its cost, use and consequences). Until the 1970s and 1980s, data was collected about their private personal meetings, the places of their excursions or rowing. The leaders and several members of the former youth communities were wiretapped. Those who yielded to pressure became informers (about nothing). As a consequence of the latter practice, the gap between Hungarian society and politicians deepened, counter-selection in human man-

agement continuously increased, and the economic development rapidly declined. Shortly (after the failure of Gorbachev’s attempt to correct the harmful effects of the soviet terror), these processes led to the overthrow of the Hungarian socialist leadership.

Due to a lack of documentary knowledge of historical perspectives, the authors could only make a few comments about the activities after the change of regime. They mention many positive changes beneficial to society. State security interventions were terminated. The standard of living and travel opportunities for the participants of the former “illegal” communities, including the surviving members of Gyurka’s community, have improved. Christian education was no more a duty undertaken by a few marginalized, self-serving small communities, it was returned to churches and (ecclesiastical) schools. The overvaluation of post-regime progress would be a mistake as it could mask our duties to continue to develop.

The fifth and final chapter aims to summarize the lessons of the book, and touches upon the things to do in the future. As during their work, the authors frequently faced the absence of information concerning the “illegal” activities of the communities, they feel it is imperative to collect and compile information regarding that era. What they consider most crucial is the use of this historical experience. The book sheds light on the fact at that time quite a few former teenage leaders successfully handled pedagogical situations many professionals failed in and would still fail in today, during the current worldwide educational crisis. Therefore, the authors con-

sider this past experience worthwhile to examine.

A different question is how to make use of the findings of an analysis of this past experience. The authors primarily address the conclusions regarding education. They urge a deeper than the current presentation of the key elements of European culture, and within that framework, mandatory familiarization with the Catholic religious traditions. Nevertheless, the matter they identify as really important is that schools should not only teach, but also edify. Within this framework, they should more broadly capitalize on the potentials in scouting. At the same time it is mentioned that success indispensably requires support from the society, especially from the parents, just as much as in the past. The current crisis of values (the undervaluation of integrity and professional knowledge, and the overvaluation of wealth and high contacts) is identified as a significant obstacle to future advancement. In addition, the authors express their hope that the Hungarian society will re-adopt traditional European cultural values, namely, it will regard knowledge and learning as vital; will treasure faith in the maintenance of its citizens' freedom and equality; and will preserve the Christian principle of loving one's neighbour. In the epilogue, the Jesuit Father Szabolcs Sajgó asks God's mercy to allow the authors' hopes come true.

The information given in the book is confirmed by rich bibliographic refer-

ences, a register listing 200 members and more than 30 photographs.

Gábor Papanek, György Rozgonyi and Gábor Veress: Értékkörzés az '50-es években. Gyurka – Rozgonyi György – ifjúsági közösségének a története [Preservation of values in the 1950's. The story of Gyurka (György Rozgonyi) and his youth movement]. Cistercian Student and Scout Foundation – Cistercian St. Imre High School in Buda, Budapest, 2019, 203 pages.

NOTE

- ¹ Typically, there wasn't even an approximate number found in the literature. Tibor Pethő wrote in the *Magyar Nemzet* issue of 19. 05. 2012 that there were more than 1000 search warrants in the Black Ravens case. According to Miklós Csapody, however, more than 1,000 actions were realized on the single night of February 7th. According to Viktor Attila Soós, however, between November 1960 and March 1961, barely more than 200 house searches were conducted (Soós, 2017, p. 136).

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