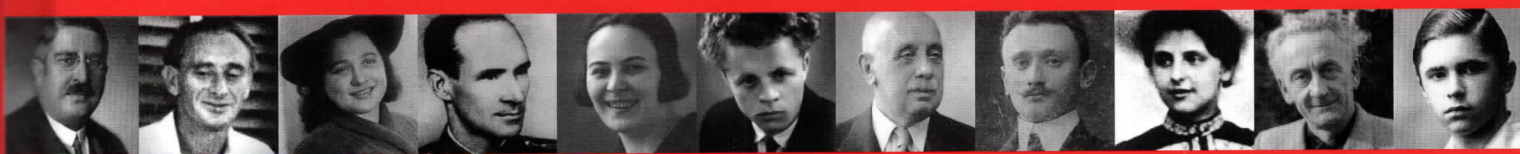


HEROES



AMONG US

50 True Stories

of Brave Hungarians in the 20th Century

Opk'n

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József Bakajsza

THANKS IN NO SMALL PART TO HIS IMPRESSIVE
LANGUAGE SKILLS, JÓZSEF BAKAJSZA SOON BECAME
THE VILLAGE MAGISTRATE.

”



ERZSÉBET MOLNÁR D.

Pouring Drinks to Save Lives

In the autumn of 1944, at the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Transcarpathia (today, the Western-most slice of the Ukraine), almost all the settlements inhabited by Hungarians were affected by one of the region's greatest tragedies of the 20th century. Huge numbers of Hungarian civilians were rounded up by the occupying Soviet forces and deported to the Soviet Union to do hard labor. This was known in Hungarian as the “málenkij robot,” a corruption of the Russian words “malenkaya rabota,” or “little work”. However, there was one small settlement not far from the city of Ungvár (today Uzhhorod, Ukraine), Gállocs (today Haloch, Ukraine), from which not a single person was taken by the Soviets to do the “little work.” Thanks to the village magistrate József Bakajsza putting his own life and the lives of his wife and children at risk, the Soviet authorities were outsmarted and the men of the village saved from the Stalinist labor camps. But Bakajsza later paid a very heavy price for his bravery.

József Bakajsza was born in Gállocs on June 24, 1905. As a child he learned Czech, Slovak, and later Russian, and when older he earned his living as a rope-maker. In the autumn of 1944, Soviet soldiers and members of the local militia started making frequent visits to the Bakajsza house, partly to loot the family's well-stocked pantry and steal their livestock, but also because they could converse in Russian with their host. Bakajsza's son Árpád shared his recollections of these evenings: “The officers would come in, three or four of them, they had started drinking somewhere, and they were drunk by the time they got to our place. My father would give them half a calf or half a pig and some brandy so that they would leave. Or he would get them totally drunk, and then we'd haul them all out to their car, prop them up in their seats and the driver would start the engine and drive them off. That's how we always managed to avoid trouble. We bought all the calves in the village, slaughtered them day in, day out, and although I was only a young boy I skinned them, then we hung them up in the

◀ *As a judge in the village of Gállocs in Transcarpathia, József Bakajsza managed to prevent the Soviet authorities from deporting the men of the village to the labor camps. He paid for his show of courage with his freedom. Bakajsza as a soldier*



Bakajsza was able to negotiate with the Soviets in part because he spoke Russian and in part because he offered them food and drink, but he did not flinch when they tried to pry information from him with the barrels of their rifles. With fellow soldiers, Bakajsza is second from the right in the middle row



Years later, Bakajsza was arrested on trumped-up charges of concealing arms. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison for anti-Soviet activities. His family had no news of him for years. Gulag prisoners working on a mine shaft in the city of Inta, the Republic of Komi, northern Russia, 1954

attic because it was winter, it was cold, so they wouldn't spoil, and then we stuffed them into the soldiers."

Thanks in no small part to his impressive language skills, József Bakajsza soon became the village magistrate. One night, when the Soviets were guests at his house, they told him, over a meal and a drink, when they were going to gather up the men to be taken to do the "little work". Now aware of the impending tragedy, Bakajsza summoned two or three of his trusted men and immediately informed all the families concerned and told them to be sure that no man over the age of 15 remained at home. Thus, no one turned up at the assembly spot at the appointed time, and when the Soviet authorities went house to house in the village, they found no-one at home who was fit for work. As village magistrate, Bakajsza was prosecuted, but he had saved himself and the villagers. Even when the Soviets presented him with a list of names, he managed to save the other men in the village. In each case, he argued that every able-bodied man in the village was needed for the post-war reconstruction work. Whenever he could, he fortified his arguments with brandy, wine, and ham, but he did not flinch when the soldiers used their firearms to try to force him to produce the specified number of men for deportation and hard labor.

In late 1946, Bakajsza was removed from his position as head of the village, but he remained a thorn in the side of the local communist leadership. The authorities continued to drop in on him frequently and to empty his pantry. A few years later, he was arrested. His daughter Katalin shared the following recollection of the events on the morning her father was arrested in 1951 (although her brother Árpád believes it was 1950): "It was February and my siblings



After Bakajsa was imprisoned, his wife and children were treated as third-class citizens. Bakajsa (second from the right) with his parents, wife, and neighbors in front of his parents' house



Bakajsa's last wish was to have a cross placed on his grave, not a red star. His memorial plaque in Gállocs

and I were getting ready for school. I was 14 years old at the time,” says Katalin. “A car stopped in front of the house, the militia men got out and informed us that this time, they had not come ‘on a friendly basis,’ but rather to search the house. A report had been submitted claiming that my father was hiding arms and waiting for American liberators. They turned the house upside down, and they burned our Hungarian books. One of the soldiers spoke Hungarian. He smiled wryly at me, holding the book of Petőfi’s poetry in one hand, and asked me if I could recite the National Song – a patriotic poem which every Hungarian child learned in school. I recited it. How could I have known that this might put

my father in danger? They never found any guns, neither then nor any other time. But in those days, you didn’t need to have any evidence to get an indictment.”

Although no weapons were found hidden in the attic, during the search, several items were found which were later used as evidence against Bakajsa, including a German-language newspaper from 1943, a

badge from the so-called Levente Movement, Hungarian flags, and a medal which was awarded to farmers. Bakajsa was taken by truck to Uzhhorod. The family had no news of him for three or four months, when eventually Árpád was able to visit him in the prison. By then, unbeknown to the family, the verdict had been reached: he had been sentenced to 25 years in prison for anti-Soviet activities.

Thanks to Bakajsa putting his own life and the lives of his wife and children at risk, the Soviet authorities were out-smarted and the men of the village saved from the Stalinist labor camps.

The surviving sources contain almost no details concerning the time he spent in prison, though we do know that he was taken to Siberia at one point. After Árpád's single prison visit, the family were given no reliable news of his fate for years, although they received reports of Bakajsza's death many times, and they would dress in black and mourn his passing. His wife and children were regarded as suspicious by the authorities, and they suffered the consequences of being cast as potential enemies of the regime. As Bakajsza's younger son Csaba noted, "We were not second-class people, we were third-class people. Even my teachers repeatedly said that I was the son of a traitor, when I had to answer questions in class, or when they were explaining something about traitors they would mention my father as an example."

A few years after the arrest (eight according to Katalin, five according to Árpád), a letter finally arrived from a medical facility in Lvov. It had been written by a physician from Uzhhorod, who informed the family that if they wanted to see József Bakajsza alive, they should go and get him. Only after the family had brought Bakajsza home did they realize what a high price he had been forced to pay for saving his village. He had had all his teeth pulled out, and his skull had been battered so brutally that, according to his children, not a single bone in it had not been fractured. Bakajsza had been tortured until he had lost his mind. Given his mental state, the family was not able to keep him at home for long. From time to time, he would be overcome by fits which made him potentially dangerous to his own children. He was taken first to the hospital in Uzhhorod for treatment and then to a mental hospital not far from the city of Khust. His family members could visit him, but he was never able to return to his home to live out his days.

On his death bed, József Bakajsza asked his doctors and the staff at the asylum to put a cross on his grave instead of a red star. The exact time of his death is not known, and his family members were unable to determine it later. We know only that his relatives were informed of his death by a member of the staff at the institute, and after several days of investigation, they were able to bring his body home at Christmas, 1968. Bakajsza was thus laid to rest in his home village. His children were never able to recover from the trauma they had suffered.

In 2014, a memorial plaque in honor of József Bakajsza was unveiled in Gálóc, where his bravery and quick-thinking had saved the men of the village from deportation and years or even lifetimes of forced labor.