



## Cardinal Mindszenty: A Man for All Seasons

Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty, who died 40 years ago, lived in an age of evil—German fascism and Soviet communism. Today, when few world leaders can be seen as heroes against tyranny in its various guises, we should remember that evil times can produce heroes like Cardinal Mindszenty, who inspired freedom fighters in Hungary and around the world.

Cardinal Mindszenty also inspired the founders of the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation—Rev. Stephen Dunker, Eleanor Schlafly, her brother Fred, and his wife, Phyllis Schlafly—who formed the Foundation in 1958. Cardinal Mindszenty's life embodied a faith that Christianity was the single most potent force to counter the spread of totalitarianism in the world. Long before “human rights” and “social justice” became fashionable political rhetoric, Cardinal Mindszenty symbolized for millions throughout the world that the struggle for freedom meant sacrifice and active engagement in the world. His uncompromising resistance to Soviet tyranny in his own country, Hungary, gave hope to his admirers everywhere. The Hungarian Catholic bishops are currently united in urging his beatification.

In an era when so much seems to be going wrong in the world and in the United States, it is worth remembering that many battles have been won in the past. As terrible as the 20th century was with its two world wars and the spread of communism after each of these wars, Mindszenty showed us what one man can do in refusing to acquiesce to tyranny.

### The Tragedy of Hungary

Born in Mindszent, Austria-Hungary on March 29, 1892 to peasant farmers, Jozsef Pehm changed his last name to the village of his birth and became a priest at the age of 23 in 1915. His faith and dedication to his people carried him to the highest position as a Catholic leader in a predominantly Catholic country that suffered immeasurably during two world wars. Yet Cardinal Mindszenty and his people were to face further tragedy when the communists seized power in 1945 under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi. The seizure of power by the communists is recounted in two

excellent histories, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) by Peter Kenz and *Communism in Hungary: From Kun to Kodar* (Hoover Institution Press, 1979) by Bennett Kovrig.

Communism was not new to Hungary. In 1919 the newly formed Communist Party of Hungary seized power under Béla Kun, a former journalist who trained in Moscow following the Bolsheviks' coup in Russia. The instability of the postwar government gave Kun and his small band of followers an opening for a Hungarian coup in March 1919. With close ties with the Soviet Union, Kun's communist government nationalized private industry and undertook a massive collectivization of agriculture over the course of the 133 days it remained in power. As rampant inflation and food shortages deepened, opposition to Kun's dictatorship of the proletariat intensified. Kun ordered a violent campaign of “revolutionary terror” against his opponents. In August 1919, the Romanian army captured Hungary's capital, Budapest, and forced Kun into exile in Vienna. He later fled to the Soviet Union. A brutal anti-communist purge followed.

The Hungarian Communist Party was kept alive by the Soviet Union. Kun emerged as a leading figure in the international communist movement, the Comintern, which was directed by Grigory Zinoviev in Moscow. Kun was sent to Germany in 1921 to help organize a revolution that ended in complete failure. Although Lenin denounced Kun's failure and called his actions “idiotic,” Kun continued to operate as a Comintern agent throughout the 1920s in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. After his service to an extensive Soviet-directed communist movement and spy ring, Kun returned to Moscow where he became embroiled in factional fights with fellow Hungarian communist exiles. A ruthless infighter, Kun denounced his opponents to the Soviet secret police as traitors and had them arrested, imprisoned and executed.

Communist Party politics finally caught up with Kun in 1938 when Stalin, during his Great Purge, ordered Kun's

arrest as a Trotskyist spy and an alleged leader of a counter-revolutionary terrorist organization. After a brief secret trial, Kun was executed.

Cardinal Mindszenty witnessed Kun's reign of terror in Hungary in 1919 and saw the consequences of the Red Terror. Kun's excessive use of force and mass executions during his brief reign left a deep imprint on Hungarians, allowing the election of a fierce anti-communist admiral, Miklós Horthy, who later entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany. The alliance proved fateful. During the Second World War, Hitler turned on Horthy, invaded his country and installed a puppet government that abetted Nazis in deporting hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews and tens of thousands of Hungarian Roma (Gypsies) to gas chambers. The Red Army "liberated" Hungary in 1945, only to install an equally oppressive regime.

### Clashes with Fascists and Communists

In the course of two and a half decades, Cardinal Mindszenty witnessed a communist dictatorship under Kun, a pro-Nazi regime under Horthy, and the return of a communist government in 1945. He knew the tragedy of war, the evils of totalitarianism, and the suffering of his people. His profound faith as a Roman Catholic gave him hope that one day his people would find true freedom.

Four years after his ordination in 1915, the young Fr. Mindszenty was arrested by the communist government in February 1919 and held until the fall of Kun's government. He was no friend of the pro-fascist government, however. Shortly after his consecration as bishop in March 1944, he was arrested for his opposition to housing fascist soldiers in parts of his official palace. He was released from house arrest in April 1945 with the fall of the pro-Nazi government.

In September 1945, he became Primate of Hungary and Archbishop of Esztergom. In February 1946 Pope Pius XII elevated him to a cardinal, warning that he would suffer martyrdom as the head of the Catholic Church in Hungary. State religion had been legally abolished in Hungary in 1848, but the Prince Primate was still considered the country's highest-ranking authority next to the sovereign throughout most of the 19th century. By the 20th century, the rank of Prince Primate had become only symbolic. The public role of the Prince Primate was restricted to the crowning of the King, but since Hungary did not have a king following the First World War, even this role had lost its significance (Margit Balogh, "Two Visits—Two Eras," *Hungarian Studies Review*, Fall 2013).

Immediately upon his appointment, Cardinal Mindszenty found himself at war with the new coalition government dominated by the communists. When the left-wing coalition government seized church land in its drive to abolish

private farm ownership, church charities were left destitute because of the loss of funds derived from church lands. Further clashes with the government came when the Party seized parochial schools and forced them to introduce atheistic Marxism.

Confronted by popular protest, the left-wing government extended an olive branch to Cardinal Mindszenty by allowing him to visit Canada, where he had been invited by Alexandre Vachon, the Archbishop of Ottawa, to participate in a congress dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The goal of the conference was to bring Catholic leaders together to pray and call attention to the struggle for a just world (Balogh, *Hungarian Studies Review*). Cardinal Mindszenty presided in the opening ceremonies of the Young Christian Workers conference held at the University of Montreal on June 24, 1947. Representatives came from 48 countries. When Cardinal Mindszenty entered the hall on the opening day, the delegates stood and gave him a ten-minute ovation.

Following the Canadian celebrations, Cardinal Mindszenty traveled to New York, where he met with Otto Habsburg, the claimant to the Hungarian throne. This meeting was later used by the Hungarian secret police as evidence that Mindszenty was a monarchist, but at the meeting Otto Habsburg and Mindszenty agreed that freedom-loving Hungarians should not organize a pro-monarchy movement, but instead should take leading positions in political parties and enter public life. Upon his return to Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty announced a celebration of the "Year of the Virgin Mary." He wanted to counter the growing power of communism by prayer and demonstrate the influence of Catholicism. He stood now in Hungary as the true defender of democratic values. The communist campaign to erect a police state failed to liquidate the religiosity of the people.

In response to his growing international status, the government initiated a vicious propaganda campaign against Mindszenty, accusing him of being pro-monarchist and a reactionary. As a cardinal, Mindszenty continued to use the traditional title of Prince Primate. Enemies went so far as to claim that Cardinal Mindszenty wanted to become the king of a restored Austro-Hungarian empire and was secretly working with American operatives to fulfill this dream.

### 'Enemy of the State'

The full anti-Catholic propaganda campaign came in 1947 when the Hungarian coalition government banned all religious orders in Hungary. Pro-communist apologists such as George Seldes joined the witch hunt by quoting communist leader Rákosi's description of the Roman Catholic Church as "a reactionary force in our country, supporting the monarchy and later Fascist dictatorship of Admiral Horthy." Cardinal Mindszenty's opposition to the communist government, Rákosi claimed in an interview,

was only to protect the church's position as a feudal landlord. Seldes became a lifelong opponent of Cardinal Mindszenty by continuing to falsely accuse him of being a Nazi sympathizer and anti-Semite. His virulence against Mindszenty is evident in George Seldes's memoir, *Witness to a Century*, published in 1974.

On December 26, 1948, Cardinal Mindszenty was arrested. After torture, a forced confession and a show trial, he was sentenced to life in prison as an enemy of the state. The free world protested. The U.S. government pushed the International Court of Justice to condemn the show trial. The U.N. Assembly condemned Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria for violations of human rights. Across the free world, Cardinal Mindszenty became a symbol for resistance to communist tyranny.

Communist propaganda that Cardinal Mindszenty represented feudal clerical reaction failed to convince many people, though it worked with some. After the *Boston Herald* condemned the trial in an editorial, a purported anti-communist wrote a letter to the editor declaring, "Hungary is a communist country, and the citizens there are living under the laws of communism. I believe the Mindszenty case is their problem and that we should not attempt to interfere in the domestic affairs of another nation" (*Boston Herald*, February 12, 1949). The letter writer was oblivious to the power of public protest to shine a light on human rights violations and embarrass the violators.

### 15 Years in U.S. Embassy

On October 30, 1956, Cardinal Mindszenty regained his freedom when Hungarians revolted against the Soviet-backed regime. Within days of his release he fled to the American embassy in Budapest. The American legation refused to turn him over to the restored communist government that brutally suppressed Hungarian freedom fighters, imprisoning thousands.

For the next fifteen years the cardinal lived in the embassy, where he continued to be a voice for freedom. He met regularly with American diplomat William S. Shepard. Shepard later recalled, "He was never intrusive....[M]ost of the time he spent actually in his office, and a particular fixation of his was writing his memoirs." He seldom relaxed. Shepard was "not sure he had a television" and noted that Mindszenty rarely watched movies. An exception was the 1955 British movie *The Prisoner* made about his life. Shepard recalled that Mindszenty "detested the film that was a fictional version" about his imprisonment and failed to capture the brutality of the communist rule (Alex Last, "Fifteen Years Holed Up in an Embassy," *BBC News Magazine*, September 12, 2012). Cardinal Mindszenty remained uncompromising in his stance against communist dictatorships. He asked Shepard, "We are not free now, we should be—why negotiate with these people?"

By the early 1970s, the Vatican sought to improve relations with the Hungarian government, feeling it was important to preserve the Hungarian Catholic Church. With the support of the United States, the Vatican struck a deal with the Hungarian authorities to have Mindszenty leave the embassy and the country on September 28, 1971. Cardinal Mindszenty was resistant to the détente with the Soviet Union, opposing what he saw as Vatican and Western accommodation with a totalitarian regime. This strained his relations with the Vatican and he was later removed as Primate of Hungary and Archbishop of Esztergom. His differences with the Vatican did not, however, prevent him from touring the U.S., Canada, Britain, West Germany and South Africa in 1973 and 1974, where he was given a hero's welcome by many Hungarian émigré communities and other supporters.

### Remembering Heroes

Cardinal Mindszenty died on May 6, 1975, having served as a symbol of resistance to totalitarian governments. Fourteen years later, in 1989, the Soviet empire crumbled under its own weight and under pressure from the United States. The story of Cardinal Mindszenty should be taught in schools today, especially parochial schools. He embodied Christian faith, courage and uncompromising principles. Like St. Thomas More, "a man for all seasons" who died for his faith in 1535, Mindszenty resisted attacks on the Church by an oppressive government and paid a heavy personal price for his principles.

Cardinal Mindszenty emboldened many anti-communists in his own generation. Today's youth have little understanding of what it meant to be involved in the anti-communist movement in the 1950s to the 1980s. Anti-communist activists were routinely attacked in the American media as right-wing extremists who did not understand the evolving nature of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, these grassroots activists remained steadfast in their belief that the Soviet Union's drive for world domination needed to be confronted. Ronald Reagan, originally a movie star, came out of this movement. When he was elected President in 1980, he brought to the White House a belief that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire" and that peace lay through strength. His vision was realized in the collapse of the Soviet Union and of its domination of eastern Europe. Mindszenty's beloved Hungary shook off the communist yoke in 1989.

As we honor the 40th anniversary of Mindszenty's death, the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation and its reports and conferences strive to emulate the cardinal's example in speaking out against multiple forms of tyranny and in support of family, faith and freedom, with an abiding faith that light will ultimately prevail over darkness.

## The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother

Cardinal Mindszenty's respect for mothers was deep. Below is the Cardinal's quote, available on a 5 1/2" x 3" card in color.



The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body ... The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces

with mothers in performing this act of creation ... What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?

— *Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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## 2015 Chicago Conference



The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation once again will be hosting a one-day Conference in Chicago! You, your family and friends are invited to attend this conference on **FAITH, FAMILY** and **FREEDOM**.

**Chicago, IL – Saturday, May 2, 2015**

Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace, IL

8:00 a.m.–3:15 p.m.

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**Ralph Martin**—“The New Evangelization: Why Bother?”

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**Ed Martin**—“How St. John Paul the Great Teaches Us to Defend God's Truth in Modern America”

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**Mary Ambuul**, Co-Chairman

**Gina Gallo**, Registrar

**Dorie Gruss**, Chairman Emeritus

This will be a great program of information, motivation, spiritual support and an opportunity to see old friends and meet new ones. Mark your calendar now.

To register, you can go to the CMF website: [www.mindszenty.org](http://www.mindszenty.org) to download and print to register for the conference. Send to Gina Gallo with payment to 2005 S. Finley Road, Unit 1011, Lombard, IL 60148.

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