



March 8, 2011

His Excellency György Szapáry
Embassy of the Republic of Hungary
3910 Shoemaker Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008

Ambassador Szapáry:

The Society of American Archivists is deeply concerned about a recent decision by the Hungarian Ministry of Public Information and Justice with regard to the government archives. The Ministry apparently has decided to rectify historical wrongs committed by the former communist regime in Hungary by de-accessioning the surveillance files assembled by the nation's secret police and Ministry of the Interior. These files are scheduled to be removed from the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security and returned permanently to their subjects, who presumably will be permitted to destroy their own files at their discretion.

We believe that the Hungarian government is likely sincere in its desire to see moral justice done. The comment by Parliamentary Secretary of State Bence Retvari that, "a constitutional state cannot preserve personal information collected through unconstitutional means, because these are the immoral documents of an immoral regime," is, it can be argued, legitimately noble. The wrongs committed against the freedoms of the Hungarian people during the former regime were many, not least of which was the violation of the fundamental right of citizens to be free from illegal surveillance by their own government. The files in question represent the worst abuses of a regime that thrived on distrust, suspicion, and institutional paranoia. Return of those files to the people who once were victimized by the organs of Hungarian State Security might well be seen as an attempt in good faith to restore citizens at least a small sense of the personal power and autonomy that was taken from them.

However, those same files also help to document a critical period in the history of the Hungarian nation and people. Leaving aside the potential richness of the information contained within the files themselves, they provide a crucial and unmatched documentation of the ways in which the government of the time interacted with the people it claimed to represent. To remove and destroy the files would be to do violence to the archival heritage

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of the nation, would create an unbridge-able chasm in the historical record, and would, we believe, prevent a full understanding of the history of the age.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this decision could allow the Hungarian government to avoid a full historical reckoning with the abuses in its past. By de-accessioning and dispersing the files in question, the government is eschewing its responsibility as guardian of its document-ary record and its cultural legacy. By disseminating the records into smaller and smaller numbers and permitting individuals to destroy their own files, the government is compromising the possibility of a full and reasonable discussion of the moral issues surrounding the communist period.

Despite its best intentions, the government may, in fact, be concealing crimes and immoral acts committed by the former regime and its members.

The Society of American Archivists, which represents 6,000 archivists in the United States, urges the Hungarian government to reconsider its decision concerning these files. The records should be considered the property of the Hungarian nation as a whole and not that of any individual. They are the elements of a history that belongs to an entire people. No people, no nation, can ever hope to fully grasp the complexities, moral ambiguities, and human decisions that go into making history with an archival record that has been broken up piecemeal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Helen R. Tibbo".

Helen R. Tibbo
President, 2010 – 2011

cc: SAA Human Rights Archives Roundtable
SAA International Affairs Roundtable
SAA Issues and Advocacy Roundtable