

===== Tamás Szőnyei =====

## **/// Fear of the Folk Dance Houses:**

### **State Security Surveillance of the Magyar Nóta Scene and the Hungarian Folk Music Revival in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

In the early 1970s, following in the footsteps of great twentieth-century Hungarian composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, young musicians rediscovered, relearned, and handed down to their generation the treasures of traditional Hungarian folk culture: music and dance. The principal homes of this modern urban folk revival were the folk dancing houses. Here, young communities formed around the pioneering bands that regularly travelled to neighboring countries—particularly Romania, home to a million-strong Hungarian minority—to learn musical practices and collect original music and dances from the villages. While the press in Hungary greeted this grassroots movement with sympathy, the authorities watched this subculture with suspicion, seeing the dance houses as hotbeds of nationalism because the people gathering there worried about the rights of the Hungarian minority living under constant threat in Romania. According to the political police, this attitude—especially if coupled with the so-called *magyarkodás*, i.e., an exaggerated show up of Hungarianness—went against the official policy of socialist internationalism. The article discusses how state security tried to disrupt the folk revival movement led by groups like Sebő, Muzsikás and Vízöntő.

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*Halászás* (Fishing): in state security parlance, it meant randomly selecting items from a large mass of mail. A private letter, confiscated during such an inspection in

<sup>1</sup> = Excerpt from Tamás Szőnyei, *Popular Music and the Secret Service in Hungary 1945–1990* (Routledge, forthcoming).

1976, led to a year-and-a-half-long confidential investigation against a sixty-six-year-old retired man. An ardent fan of the genre of *Magyar nóta*, Károly Szénási lamented in this letter to a friend that several old Hungarian towns now belonged to other countries and that the nation had degenerated under the socialist system. Since the nineteenth century, *Magyar nóta* has been an enduringly popular genre of folkish songs, whose composers—unlike those in the genre of folk music—are usually known. *Magyar nóta*, traditionally accompanied by Gipsy bands, provides singalongs to drink and dance, and it expresses much: personal or political emotions, love and joy, sorrow and pain, patriotism or chauvinism.<sup>2</sup> Szénási organized *Magyar nóta* events in Békés County in the southern part of Hungary, and only this music relieved his sorrow, at least temporarily. Since he had urged his friend to burn the letter, the political police could not use it in an open procedure because doing so would have exposed their interception. But following this “fishing” operation, they initiated targeted checks of his correspondence and instructed informants to discover whether his pain at the truncation of Hungary and the suppression of national feelings had led him to commit a political crime. Did his *Magyar nóta* nights aim to spread nationalism in addition to providing entertainment? The documents from the confidential investigation show that the secret police, in the name of combating nationalism, devoted a great deal of energy to uncovering actions that now seem completely innocuous. His case unfolds in a 160-page dossier entitled “Jutasi.”<sup>3</sup>

After 1963, the political or secret police—in other words, the state security or state security service—was officially called the Main Directorate III within the Ministry of the Interior. One of its units, Directorate III/III, was responsible for domestic counterintelligence. Within its organization, separate departments handled church affairs, youth, culture, political opposition, and individuals deemed socially dangerous. Popular music-related cases—including the ones described here—typically fell under the purview of domestic counterintelligence. Its ultimate goal was to defend and preserve the system based on the monopolistic power of the ruling communist party. Following party directives, it employed a network of covert informants and technical surveillance methods to gather information and, whenever any activity deemed dangerous was detected, to intervene; this in turn disrupted those circles—including music lovers and bands—considered hostile to the system. This explains why the secret police took action in the music-related cases described below.

2 == Lynn M. Hooker, “From Café to Stage to Museum: The Transformation of the Gypsy Music Industry in 20th Century Hungary,” *Hungarian Studies* vol. 29, nos. 1–2 (2015): 121–34.

3 == ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-16942 “Jutasi” The story under the next subheading is based upon the documents in this object dossier between December 1976 and May 1978.

## == The Trouble with Clarinet Solos

Károly Szénási studied in a military school and, during the Second World War, he fought on the Soviet front.<sup>4</sup> Later, he served in the logistics branch of the Hungarian People's Army (*Magyar Néphadsereg*) until his retirement in 1967, in the course of which he earned several medals. He lived in Békéscsaba, a medium-sized town near the Romanian border. The two informants assigned to him were slightly younger, but still over fifty, ensuring that a generation gap would not cause problems in gaining his trust. The person code-named "Kiss István" filled over 600 pages with his reports between 1959 and 1981. For his part, "Forgács Béla" amassed about 550 pages from 1967 to 1985. Both reported mainly on Békés County cultural life, including accounts of one another.<sup>5</sup> "Kiss István" ran the local film library, while "Forgács Béla" was a librarian and a photographer, who thus could be present at a wide range of events without attracting attention.<sup>6</sup>

"Kiss István" organized cultural events, so it was his task to learn about Szénási's *Magyar nóta* evenings. He discovered that Szénási attended the *Magyar Nóta* Collectors Club's yearly meetings in the ironworker union's Csili Cultural Centre (officially named *Pesterzsébeti Vasas Művelődési Otthon*) in Budapest. "Forgács Béla" lived near the targeted individual and was involved in folk literature, folk customs and music, so he gained his trust as a fellow collector. He reported that Károly Szénási collected songs in three large, red booklets, containing about 3,000 items of sheet music as well as a list of composers and lyricists. He was in correspondence, among others, with Dezső Nótás Nagy, a composer and retired school principal living in Miskolc, but he had pen pals in neighboring countries as well.<sup>7</sup> According to "Kiss István," Szénási "lamented" over the lost territories and the ethnic Hungarians living over the borders, as well as over the fact that the youth preferred beat music over *Magyar nóta*. The informant once saw Szénási dressed in a festive attire while watching a *nóta* show on TV, as if he were in a concert hall, with the "reverence" of "a priest at mass."

"Kiss István" reported that Szénási had written letters to the music editors and the deputy president of Hungarian Radio, in which he complained about the marginalization of *Magyar nóta*. The informant handed the letters over to the case officer, who placed copies of them in the file. Based on his own measurements, Szénási provided figures to prove that the airtime of *Magyar nóta* had di-

4 == Károly Szénási (1912–1984).

5 == Since code names in quotation marks are not real names, I adhere to Hungarian conventions: giving the family name first, followed by the personal name. This is as opposed to real names, where I follow international conventions.

6 == According to ÁBTL 2.2.2. "Network registry of the state security's secret collaborators," the code names "Kiss István" and "Forgács Béla" correspond to László Horváth and Ferenc Balogh, respectively.

7 == Dezső Nótás Nagy (1903–1979).

minated compared to that of beat music, and he followed these up with “provocative” questions. “Are the kitschy music products imported from America not harmful to the morals of the youth? Or are these shows representing the true socialist culture? Are *Magyar nóta* and folk songs just so unnecessarily bad? If they persecute *Magyar nóta*, why is it used to please foreign delegations and guests and not beat music?” On behalf of thousands of *nóta*-loving people, he asked for an increase in the airtime of *nóta* during the day instead of late at night. He also had an odd request: that they eliminate the “unnecessary and long” clarinet solos.

The issue of the clarinet solos could have been the point where the secret police interrupted their investigation. But they went ahead. They came into possession of a petition sent by Dezső Nótás Nagy, mentioned above, to the Music Fund of the Hungarian People’s Republic in defense of the *Magyar nóta* genre. It totaled nine typed pages—thirty-eight separate points—all in the name of *nóta*-lovers. They also learned that elderly *nóta*-lovers were collecting signatures to strengthen their demands, which were addressed to the *Magyar Nóta és Műdal Bizottság* (Committee for Folkish Songs) and *Zeneműkiadó* (Editio Musica). State security did not consider this correspondence illegal. However, they deemed the collection of signatures and the organization of social gatherings of *nóta*-lovers to be “stirring up nationalism,” especially because Károly Szénási had already disclosed his “anti-Soviet and nationalist leanings” to the informants.

So, they continued to monitor him until his Achilles’ heel was found. Although he organized only three or four *nóta* nights a year—purely out of devotion to the genre, and without earning any income from it—he did not have a license to do so. Just as Al Capone, the Chicago mafia boss of the Prohibition Era, was put behind bars for tax evasion, in 1978 Károly Szénási was summoned before the police on the pretext of unlicensed *nóta* nights. Of course, prison was not a real threat. However, the proceedings themselves must have been a shock; he was questioned about his “politically objectionable” views expressed in the intercepted letter, and even the addressee was also interrogated. Several of his acquaintances were subjected to “educational” talks in their homes by the police. Károly Szénási was cautioned to prevent him from committing a future offence. The venues in Békés County where he staged *nóta* music nights were notified that he had no license to do so, and the county council’s department of culture was asked to step up their control over the organization of such shows.<sup>8</sup>

### **= = Problems with Nationalism**

The secret police investigated and disrupted the activities of the retired *nóta*-lover as part of the fight against nationalism, in accordance with the 1970 Order

8 = = Local councils responsible for local public services, including health, education, culture, etc., were under party control and closely connected with the local police bodies.

No. 0022 of the Minister of the Interior, which defined the tasks of the state security services in cultural life.<sup>9</sup> The experiences of implementing this order were examined three years later. According to the results of the examinations, in 1972 they filed for action in 120 cases against 250 persons, mainly for incitement against the regime on so-called nationalist grounds. In 1973, around ninety individuals belonged to the nationalist category. They were all under “close control” due to suspected hostile activities.<sup>10</sup>

Following a 1971 party decision to pass legislation on youth, the Minister of the Interior issued a directive on the tasks of state security in youth protection. According to this 1973 document, nationalism was exerting considerable influence on youth, spurring them to illicit demonstrations. Consequently, the main task became prevention. Hostile elements had to be detected in universities, colleges, high schools, and “legal, semi-legal and illegal youth clubs,” where state security considered it necessary to strengthen its operational position by increasing the number of informers.<sup>11</sup>

The phenomenon of nationalism influencing youth and emerging in the clubs meant that, besides beat and rock, state security now had to monitor folk music, too. In the early '70s, following in the footsteps of great twentieth-century composers like Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and other folklorists who made field recordings of peasant music, young musicians rediscovered, relearned, and handed down to their own generation the treasures of traditional Hungarian folk culture, music and dance.<sup>12</sup> The principal sites of this modern urban folk revival were the folk dance houses. Here, young communities formed around the pioneering bands that regularly travelled to neighboring countries—particularly to Transylvania in Romania, with its 1.5 million-strong ethnic Hungarian minority—to learn musical practices and collect original music and dances from the villages. The press in Hungary greeted this grassroots movement with sympathy. However, the authorities watched this subculture with suspicion, seeing the *táncház* (dance house) as a hotbed of nationalism because people gathering there cared about the rights of Hungarian minorities under constant threat in Romania and the Slovakian part of Czechoslovakia. According to the secret police, it constituted jingoism and *magyarkodás* (an exaggerated show of Hungarianness), which went against the official policy of socialist internationalism.

9 = = ÁBTL 4.2. 10-21/22/1970. Order No. 0022 of the Minister of the Interior, September 25, 1970.

10 = = ÁBTL 1.11.1. 45-13-4/1973. Report on the implementation of Ministerial Order No 0022/1970 on the tasks of operational work against hostile activities in the cultural field, March 13, 1973.

11 = = ÁBTL 4.2. 10-22/16/1973. Directive of the Minister of the Interior, July 4, 1973.

12 = = Béla Bartók (1881–1945); Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967).

The folk music revival started with a television talent contest in 1969–70. Although Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos, a duo of students from the university of technology, did not make it to the finals, Halmos won a prize as a solo singer.<sup>13</sup> After graduation, music became their profession. They set classical and contemporary poems to music and were invited to the Twenty-Fifth Theatre, while Sebő played a modern-day bard with a guitar in feature films as well.<sup>14</sup> The Sebő-Halmos ensemble held the first dance house with four folk dance groups in the club of a Budapest bookshop. A “professional” event without an audience, this Saturday evening in May 1972 marked a milestone of the modern urban folk revival; it introduced the notion of dance house, borrowed from the Hungarian community in the village of Szék in Transylvania (Sic in Romanian), as a pure alternative to the fiery folklore shows aimed at entertaining tourists. Historically, dance houses offered space and time for unmarried young men and women to meet and dance. Their revival thus meant the survival of this tradition and the expression of national identity.<sup>15</sup>

In November 1972, the agent code-named “Tatár Imre” was tasked with listening to a lecture on the prehistory of the Hungarians at the Institute of Folk Art in Budapest. He guessed that most of the audience were young intellectuals, seemingly knowing each other and being passionate about the subject. Poet and publicist Sándor Csoóri took active part in the debate: warning that folk traditions were in danger, calling their preservation crucial, and emphasizing the

13 = = Ferenc Sebő (1947–); Béla Halmos (1946–2013).

14 = = Még kér a nép [The People Still Ask], directed by Miklós Jancsó (1971) <https://filmio.hu/film/meg-ker-a-nep-11136965>; Fotográfia [Photography], directed by Pál Zolnay (1972) <https://filmio.hu/film/fotografia-10833006>

15 = = Jenő Széll, ed., *Húzzad, húzzad, muzsikásom... A hangszeres népzene feltámadása* [Play it, Play it, my Musician... The revival of instrumental folk music] (Múzsák, 198); András Bankó, *Muzsikás évtizedek (életmorzsalékok és sorstörédek)* [Muzsikás Decades (Fragments of Life and Fate)] (Kós Károly Alapítvány, 1994); Simon Broughton, “A Musical Mother Tongue. Hungary’s Magyar and Gypsy Traditions,” in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Simon Broughton, Mark Ellingham, David Muddyman, and Richard Trillo (Rough Guides Ltd., 1994); Béla Halmos, “The Táncház Movement,” *Hungarian Heritage* vol. 1, nos. 1–2 (2000): 29–40; György Martin, “Discovering Szék,” *Hungarian Heritage* vol. 2, nos. 1–2 (2001): 31–40; László Távolodó Marton, *Érintés (Világzeném)* [Touch (My World Music)] (Etnofon, 2001), 209–270; Ferenc Sebő, ed., *A táncház sajtója. Válogatás a korai évekből 1968–1972* [Dance House in the Press. A Selection of the Early Years 1968–1972] (Hagyományok Háza, 2007); Balázs Balogh and Ágnes Fülemüle, “Cultural Alternatives, Youth and Grassroots Resistance in Socialist Hungary—The Folk Dance and Music Revival,” *Hungarian Studies* vol. 22, nos. 1–2 (2008): 41–60; Béla Jávorszky, *A magyar folk története. Népzene, táncház, világzene* [The History of Hungarian Folk: Folk Music, Dance House, World Music] (Kossuth, 2013); Colin Quigley, “The Hungarian Dance House Movement and Revival of Transylvanian String Bands,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford University Press, 2014).

importance of freedom of thought and expression.<sup>16</sup> Plunging into political activities in the '70s, Csoóri became a target of surveillance. He was present at the birth of the Budapest dance houses and was also close to the folk revival due to family reasons, his wife being a folk singer and his son a founding member of the Muzsikás ensemble. The handler of "Tatár Imre" assessed that, although the efforts to "save" folk culture were acceptable, „nationalist sentiments were systematically aroused" and the 150- to 180-strong audience was susceptible to them.<sup>17</sup>

Another informant, code-named "Vitéz," was also dispatched to the same event by the same state security officer. "Vitéz" had taken part in the 1956 uprising and had subsequently given information about his fellow prisoners. Following his release, he filled some 3,000 pages from 1962 to 1980. A psychologist, he could inspire confidence in himself and thus form an opinion about the personality of his targets. Upon visiting several events, he noted the audience was passionately interested in folk traditions. He made friends with the main organizer, József Zelnik, a university student who revealed his plans, and a young folk singer, Laura Faragó, one of the 1970 TV contest winners who enhanced the emotional impact of poetry readings by singing folk ballads.<sup>18</sup> "Vitéz" stressed the necessity of preventing the movement from unfolding and suggested monitoring the organizers, the audience, and the performers.<sup>19</sup>

State security took pains to prevent the spread of the folk revival, the new dance houses, and programs of (particularly Transylvanian) folk culture in clubs because of their inherent oppositional stance. "Chauvinist, nationalist gatherings are taking place under the guise of folk dancing," reported "Hutter Antal" in the summer of 1973. According to him, the Sebő-Halmos ensemble called the dance house the "only way to oppose."<sup>20</sup> However, observing the folk revival and the dance houses was only the immediate goal. It was not the music or dancing that interested state security, but the people formulating ideas with alternatives to the official political line of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (*Magyar Szocialista*

16 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-41618, 198–200, report, November 20, 1972. Sándor Csoóri (1930–2016).

17 = = In the secret services, handlers were—and still are—the case officers responsible for managing agents (in other words, informants, sources, or network individuals) in clandestine operations. It was—and is—their task to study prospective recruits and then train them, determine their assignments and behavioral line, keep them under control, and double-check the information furnished by them.

18 = = József Zelnik (1949–); Laura Faragó (1949–).

19 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-39112/3, 247–257, 272–274 and 301–302, reports of February 15 and 19, March 1, and April 28, 1973. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the code name corresponds to János Virágh.

20 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37604, 177, July 5, 1973. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the code name refers to András Herczeg. Recruited in 1959 while in prison at the age of 24, he provided information on inmates, including prominent '56ers. Released in 1963, he filled two volumes with reports until 1978.

*Munkáspárt*). The longer-term plan was to get close to the middle-aged intellectuals, writers, filmmakers, historians, journal editors, and university professors interested in folk culture—i.e., the leading figures of the nationalist opposition—through these young folk enthusiasts. By penetrating the center of this circle through informers, they aimed to prevent the spread of nationalist ideology and its development into political activity such as the revival of the *népi-nemzeti* (folkish, populist, nationalist or *Narodnik* in Russian) movement, which had played a significant role in twentieth-century Hungarian cultural and political history.<sup>21</sup>

“Kárpáti Emese” informed on the changes to the line-ups of seminal folk ensembles Orfeo, Vízöntő, and Kolinda and the successful Belgian and French tour of the latter.<sup>22</sup> These groups were seeking new directions, with their own compositions turning towards the sounds of the neighboring countries and the Balkans; indeed, they were thus playing world music years before the term was even coined. Evaluating a 1972 report by “Kárpáti Emese,” the handler (i.e., the contact officer) noted that the members of the Orfeo theatre and music groups were under surveillance in the *Közösség* and *Subások* cases. “*Közösség*” (“Community”) were left-wing artists experimenting with a communal lifestyle. *Suba* is an ancient Hungarian garment: a wide sheepskin coat, in which shepherds out in the fields did not freeze, even in winter. Thus, “*Subások*” refers to “Those Wearing Sheepskin Coats.” These words were how state security codenamed the confidential investigation against the luminaries of the so-called populist-nationalist intelligentsia. The resulting observational material of the so-called nationalist opposition between 1973 and 1989 runs to 1,500 pages in the five volumes of the operational dossier.<sup>23</sup>

In 1977, state security once again assessed the implementation of the 1970 Ministerial Order No. 0022. They established that attacks from nationalist political platforms had particularly intensified after 1974. The nationalist opposition described the Party’s cultural policy as anti-national; in response, rather than internationalism they sought to nourish a “counter-culture” aimed at cultivating

21 == Gyula Borbándi, *A magyar népi mozgalom története [The History of the Hungarian Populist Movement]* (Püski, 1983); István Papp, *A magyar népi mozgalom története 1920–1990 [The History of the Hungarian Populist Movement 1920–1990]*. Jaffa, 2012.

22 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-38310, 92–93, 102–103, 129–130 and 138–141, reports of September 27, 1973, January 18, 1974, and February 6 and March 26, 1976. The reports listed Kiss Ferenc, Jr., János Vas, Ágnes Zsigmondi, Ágnes Kamondy, Iván Lantos, and Péter Dabasi as band members. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the code-name corresponds to draughtsman Erzsébet Szászai, recruited in 1971 at the age of 21.

23 == Tamás Szőnyei, *Titkos írás. Állambiztonsági szolgálat és irodalmi élet 1956–1990 1–2 [Secret Writing: State Security Service and Literary Life 1956–1990, vol. 1–2]*, vol. 2 (Noran Könyvesház, 2012), 551–728; ÁBTL 3.1.5. O-19783/1–5. The main target of the file was literary historian Mihály Ilia (1934–), professor at the University of Szeged and one-time editor of a journal, *Tiszatáj*.



Hungarian national traditions, sometimes with an anti-Semitic tinge and indirectly linked to the idea of border revision.<sup>24</sup> The interest in folk art did not automatically go hand in hand with anti-Semitism, but the fact is that it has surfaced from time to time in Hungary.

### = = Without Chair and Piano

In May 1973, fresh recruit “Segesvári Zsolt” was dispatched to the dance house at the House of Culture (*Fővárosi Művelődési Ház, FMH*) to look around and, if required for further visits, become a club member. On the second occasion—the last before the summer break—there was a large crowd; instruction in the form of circle dancing was offered, while the Sebő-Halmos ensemble performed on stage. During the intermission, a photographer projected slides, commenting on the carved wooden buildings and wedding dances in Transylvania. Afterwards, another band played, and the audience sang along and danced until 10 pm. The informant reported a friendly atmosphere, with no political comments. In June, he was sent to the Kassák Club—named after avant-garde giant Lajos Kassák—but there, too, it was summer break.<sup>25</sup>

The folk revival gained momentum in 1973–74. Though Sebő and Halmos spent half a year in Japan playing in a restaurant, new bands formed in Budapest (including Muzsikás), dance houses started (in FMH, Kassák), and several clubs offered folk music and poems set to music. Ten years earlier, beat music spread like wildfire in clubs like those mentioned, playing a pivotal role in the life of youth communities by providing a public space for culture and entertainment.<sup>26</sup> Now, it was the folk scene that state security had to watch out for. The differences between the two genres lay not only in sound volume and crowd size (with folk being essentially acoustic and appealing to a narrower audience), but also that folk constituted a risk factor due to its supposed nationalism and association with older intellectuals. Thus, several informants were dispatched to venues with folk music, foremost of which was the Kassák Club, hosted by the Sebő-Halmos ensemble. As it was located in the Zuglói district, state security christened their case “Zuglói.”

24 = = ÁBTL 1.11.1. 45-13-3/1977. Assessing the implementation of Ministerial Order No 0022/1970 on the operational tasks against hostile activities in the cultural field, March 15, 1977.

25 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37911, 11–16 and 25–29, reports of May 21, 23, and 29 and June 27, 1973. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the real name of “Segesvári Zsolt” was István Sárosi. He was studying at a maritime vocational school when he was recruited in 1973 at the age of 19, based on politically-compromising data. Lajos Kassák (1887–1967).

26 = = For the historical role and current fate of local cultural and community centers in Budapest, see Andreas Fogarasi, *Kultur und Freizeit [Culture and Leisure]: Hungarian Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice, 52nd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia*, ed. Katalin Timár (Walther König, 2007).

Another regular venue was the Bem Club. It opened in 1966 on the ground floor of a former aristocratic family palace on the Bem quay, named after a Polish general of the 1848–49 war of independence. The club’s legendary status was established by bands such as Kex, Mini, Sakk-Matt, Syrius and Tolcsvay, all of them securing their place in Hungarian rock history during the late 1960s and the 1970s. In September 1974, Ferenc Sebő gave a lecture there on folk tradition. Informant “Forgó” was often sent to houses of culture, so it was just one of his many tasks between 1971 and 1985. According to his report, Sebő saw folk arts as a basis from which, by rejecting mysticism and nostalgia, a modern art form could be created in music that would even address the issues of the day.<sup>27</sup> In October, “Pier” had to go to the Kassák Club for a Sebő-Halmos evening. The informant struggled to describe the music and the dances; nevertheless, his handler, a lieutenant, was satisfied with his approximations. The lieutenant’s superior, a major, sternly stated, “We are not interested in the style of music, but in the words coming with it”—namely, the political opinions.<sup>28</sup>

In December 1974, “Liliom” and “Tompá” were sent to the Kassák. Their accounts confirmed and complemented each other. Both reported a discussion with a literary history professor after the dance. Christmas was approaching, yet “Liliom” was surprised to hear traditional church carols and witness a nativity play. She was also surprised to notice how many people “worshipped Transylvania.” The handler noted that neither the carol “*Mennyből az angyal*” (“Angel from Heaven”) nor the nativity play were in accordance with official cultural policy.<sup>29</sup>

The “Zuglói” case does not have a file in the ÁBTL archives. If an object dossier existed, it would contain evaluations of information, operational plans, and photos taken at the Sebő dance house. Without it, we can only reconstruct the story from work dossiers of informants and recollections—as fragmentary a source base as can be imagined. In February 1975, “Tompá” and “Firenze”—the latter recruited specifically for the “Zuglói” case—met conspiratorially in an apartment to identify individual persons in photos. They could identify some of the club members and guests by name, while others they knew only by sight. For instance, they could determine that some were members of a folk dance group, while others were present at every event; this group took part in discussions in the library,

27 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-40723, 127–129, report of September 26, 1974. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the code name refers to draughtsman István Fülöp, recruited in 1971 at the age of 20.

28 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37720, 270–274, report of October 31, 1974. According to the ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network registry, the code name corresponds to technical editor Péter Scheer, who collaborated with state security between 1969 and 1978.

29 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-36931, 106–109, report of January 13, 1975. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-36848, 24–28, reports of December 23, 1974 and January 17, 1975.

while those knew the musicians personally, and so forth.<sup>30</sup> Even incomplete information like this could be valuable.

“Gyapjas” noted that beyond the entertainment, many were attracted by the “unspoken” nationalist nature of the program at the Kassák. In March 1975, he gave a detailed account: it featured short films about folk traditions, a discussion with an architect, dancing to the Sebő ensemble, poems set to music, and a tale in dialogue form, harking back to the sixteenth and seventeenth when Hungary had for 150 years belonged to the Ottoman Empire. The informant summarized the tale as follows: A Turkish bey entered a Hungarian baker’s shop, asked for bread, and ate his fill. He wanted to sit down, but there was no chair. The baker explained that Turkish soldiers had taken away the chair and the cushion. Finally, the baker bade farewell to the bey, telling him, “If you find the ground hard here, you should sit on a soft divan at home.” The audience understood the symbolism and welcomed it with loud applause.<sup>31</sup> Another informant, “Segesvári Zsolt,” also described the tale, adding that it always had great success.<sup>32</sup> The tale’s unspoken message was one of resentment against occupiers—a clear reference to the Soviets.

In January 1975, “Tompa” bought a membership card and, being a rock singer himself, became acquainted with two Sebő members. In February, “Lilium” reported that her gynecologist held sexual education courses for young people at the Kassák Club. In the report, she wrote verbatim: “sex club.”<sup>33</sup> In the light of subsequent events, this probably proved a practical tip-off for state security. In May 1975, “Tompa,” “Segesvári Zsolt,” and “Firenze” reported that Sándor Csoóri was present and had shown a radio play from tape, its text written by himself after a Transylvanian folk ballad with a Sebő soundtrack. It did not have a political message. “Tompa” was invited to the club’s end-of-season meeting to discuss current problems. The case officer briefed the informant on what to

30 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-36848, 35, report of February 20, 1975; ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37517, 20–21, report of February 18, 1975. According to the Network registry, the first codename refers to singer Ferenc Gerdesits, recruited in 1973 at the age of 26, while the latter codename hides Zsuzsanna Takács, who worked as a clerk at the municipal council when she was recruited in 1975, at the age of 21.

31 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-40827, 5–15, reports of December 11, 1974 and March 12, 1975. According to the Network registry, the code name is that of driver Károly Kaposvári, recruited in 1973 at the age of 19. According to the report, Sándor Weöres wrote the poem, though it was in fact written by Károly Tamkó Sirató. It was easy to confuse them because the Sebő-Halmos ensemble also set Weöres’ words to music, and both poets wrote many children’s poems.

32 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37911, 107–111, reports of May 12 and 22, 1975.

33 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-36931, 110–111, report of February 11, 1975. “Tompa” became acquainted with Béla Halmos and Gergely Koltay. The latter would later form another folk band, Kormorán.

pay attention to and planned to give him a portable wireless radio transmitter. But “Tompá” skipped the meeting due to other commitments, so he could not secretly broadcast (indeed, perhaps he did not want to). He did say, however, that fewer people attended the closing night than before.<sup>34</sup>

The decrease in the number of visitors pleased state security, who perceived it as the result of their own actions that would create difficulties for the Sebő ensemble’s dance house. However, it reopened in September 1975 with exhibitions, lectures, music, and dance. Singer Márta Sebestyén joined the band, but—according to several informants—the atmosphere had changed.<sup>35</sup> For state security, this showed the impact of their actions: the so-called realization of operation “Zuglói.” Diligently frequenting the Kassák, “Firenze” disclosed that the autumn season opened without a speech. A club member told “Tompá” that “certain people” attributed a nationalist character to the folk movement and thus to the activities of the Sebő ensemble. According to the state security officers, the lack of an opening speech was the consequence of their “disruptive measures,” while “certain people” referred to the police.

While attending folk events, “Rigai András” revealed that he had met a girl at the Kassák who was an active member of the club. In the course of studying ethnology at ELTE University, she had been on a collecting trip in Transylvania. Since she knew all the important figures in the club, the case officer hoped that through her, “Rigai András” might get close to Csoóri and his circle. However, there is no trace in the work dossier of this state security dream ever coming true. Yet, he did report in November 1975 that a night had been cancelled because the Sebő ensemble performed at the FMH gala in celebration of the Bartók Dance Ensemble having received the European prize for cultivating and disseminating folk culture. “Rigai András” saw the girl home and then quoted her as saying that their club set out with pure intentions to cultivate folk traditions, but that “official organs” were watching them in fear of nationalist tendencies. At the end of the spring season, they had even feared the club would be banned; this did not happen, however, and on the contrary, they had received an award. ““Sebő” refrains from any manifestation that could be associated with nationalism,” she said. According to the handler, this cautiousness proved the “disruptive effect” of their measures, showing specifically that word had spread that several club members were being subjected to “warning” talks by the police.<sup>36</sup> When I interviewed Ferenc Sebő, he told me that parents of those summoned to the police got scared and asked him

34 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37517, 33–36, report of May 14, 1975; ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-36848, 43–44, reports of May 14 and 29, 1975.

35 = = Márta Sebestyén (1957–).

36 = = ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-39472, 15–18 and 22, reports of October 25 and November 14, 1975. The real name of the informant was József Kökösi, whose activity is documented in two volumes totaling 480 pages.

what was going on because they understood that someone had reported that youngsters allegedly had sex under the piano in the Kassák Club.

Let us pause here for a moment to recall that the informant codenamed “Liliom” had made mention of a “sex club” in February 1975. She may have given state security the idea of fabricating a “legend” of alleged copulation to justify the summoning. The police aimed to prevent the spread of nationalism by making them afraid of frequenting the club. Ferenc Sebő asked Iván Vitányi for help.<sup>37</sup> Director of the *Népművelési Intézet* (Institute of People’s Education), Vitányi had been involved in the folk dance movement since the ’40s, studying and collecting music and writing studies. As someone open to new phenomena in youth culture including beat music, he welcomed the folk revival with an enthusiastic essay recalling his own youth.<sup>38</sup> When Sebő approached him, Vitányi invited György Aczél—the party politician overseeing cultural matters for over three decades after 1956—to the Kassák Club. They did not announce the visit in advance. According to “Firenze,” their visit took place on March 21, 1975, though she could not provide details.<sup>39</sup>

According to Ferenc Sebő, Aczél dropped in on a packed event and saw the uplifting mood among the youngsters, mostly in jeans, who were participating in the folk dances. “How come they’re not in folk attire?” he asked. “They’re not fake peasants, Comrade Aczél,” Sebő replied, adding that the dance they were doing was “like rock and roll, only better.” A year later, when Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos received a Trade Unions award, Aczél approached Sebő in Parliament. “I hear they’re persecuting the Sebő ensemble,” he said jokingly. “We’re not being persecuted, it’s just that some stupid agents report that the young people at the Kassák Club are f\*\*\*ing under the piano, even though you could see there was only an upright piano there with no room under,” the musician replied. “Comrade Sebő, I can’t stand behind every policeman,” the politician retorted. From then on, they were left alone.<sup>40</sup>

The first LP (1975) and this award (1976) were signs that the Sebő ensemble was gaining recognition. However, this did not mean state security had stopped monitoring the dance house scene. In September 1975, “Tatár Imre” reported on a high-spirited Muzsikás gig in a jam-packed downtown basement, where at least sixty percent of the music originated from Transylvania, according to the informant’s estimate. In November, while hitchhiking at a petrol station, he met a young folk musician driving a wine-red Wartburg. (Besides the iconic Trabant, this was

37 == Iván Vitányi (1925–2021).

38 == Iván Vitányi, “Gondolatok a táncházban” [“Thoughts in the Dance House”]. *Élet és Irodalom*, December 23, 1972.

39 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37517, 33–36, report of May 14, 1975. György Aczél (1917–1991).

40 == The interview with Ferenc Sebő was conducted on October 12, 2004.

the less-emblematic East-German-built car.) The handler showed the informant photographs, and they established that he had got the ride from Dániel Hamar, a founding member of Muzsikás.<sup>41</sup> From then on, Hamar was regarded as a candidate recruit to the network of informants and was given the code name “Hegedűs” (“Fiddler”) without his knowledge. “Tatár Imre” was tasked with studying him. The informant was to try to land a performing opportunity as a folk singer with the help of Hamar, but they did not get that far. However, when they next met at the FMH dance house bar, Hamar talked about their collecting trips to Transylvania and complained that Muzsikás played for half the money of the Sebő ensemble. “Tatár Imre” then offered his help at the ORI concert agency (*Országos Rendező Iroda*, National Concert Organizing Bureau) to raise their fee. The informant had to make friends with Sándor Csoóri, Jr. as well and obtain an invitation to one of their gigs in the countryside.<sup>42</sup> His other task was to ascertain the relationship between the Muzsikás and Sebő ensembles and strengthen their rivalry, if possible. He tried to achieve it by telling Hamar and Csoóri that the Sebő ensemble was to receive an award. They knew about it already; it was deserved and “a step forward for folk culture,” they said. Nevertheless, there was some envy among them because Muzsikás, though just as capable as the Sebő ensemble, was earning less, according to the report.<sup>43</sup>

The Muzsikás part ended here in the work dossier of “Tatár Imre.” According to the network records in the archives, Dániel Hamar was not recruited as an informant. In 1977, Muzsikás released their first LP. Béla Halmos quit the Sebő ensemble to concentrate on teaching and researching folk music rather than playing live, and two other Sebő members, Péter Éri and Márta Sebestyén joined Muzsikás.<sup>44</sup> “Gyapjas” and “Rigai András” furnished information on Muzsikás gigs, which featured large crowds learning folk dances. State security officers were pleased to see that no political discussions took place, and thus felt no need for further action.<sup>45</sup> They felt that by harassing the audience of the Kassák Club, they had achieved their goal: no more “*Narodnik*” tendencies observed in the dance houses. Yet they could not rest easy.

In 1979, Directorate III/III of the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for domestic counterintelligence, compiled a report on nationalist-based hostile activities. The thirty-three-page paper pointed out that the nationalist opposition was seeking to gain positions in the field of culture and was “tendentiously” using the fad of folk art and folk traditions to win over young people. With a significant

41 == Dániel Hamar (1951–).

42 == Sándor Csoóri, Jr. (1956–).

43 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-41618/3, 170, 185–188, 196–198, 201–202, 208 and 229, reports of September 30 and December 9 and 22, 1975, and of January 20 and 26 and March 2, 1976.

44 == Besides Dániel Hamar and Sándor Csoóri, Jr., the third founding member of Muzsikás was Mihály Sipos, although “Tatár Imre” did not name him.

45 == ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-40827, 241–245, report of May 17, 1978. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-39472, 189, report of January 9, 1979.

part of the living traditions found in Transylvania, the opposition could highlight the “injustice” of the existing borders. Almost forty percent of the information on the activities of “hostile nationalist” groups came from the secret network.<sup>46</sup> While this state security summary report considered the interest in folk art a hostile activity, the 1980 documents by the Communist Youth Association (*Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ*) described the dance house movement as beneficial and worthy of support.<sup>47</sup> In the coordinate system of cultural policy,<sup>48</sup> dance house was never banned or prohibited—“only” placed under surveillance. It belonged to the tolerated/permitted category and even received official support and promotion from time to time—as highlighted in the first National Dance House Festival in the Budapest Sports Hall in 1982, which would become an annual event.

### = = Epilogue: Before the Last Hour

Besides the Sebő ensemble and Muzsikás, two or three other bands occasionally appear in dance-house-related state security documents. However, the scene was constantly expanding. A host of new groups emerged, not only exploring the authentic music of the other peoples living in Hungary (South Slavs, the Roma, Jews, Bulgarians or Greeks), but also mixing other (Balkan, Turkish or Middle Eastern) influences and inspiring rock and jazz musicians. A long list could be compiled of outstanding artists, many of whom were or still are distinguished guests at world music festivals.

After 1976, Kolinda toured Western Europe for years, with albums released by Hexagone, Pan Records, and Celluloid. The '80s and '90s brought about the international success of Muzsikás, with albums released by Munich Records and Hannibal Records. Muzsikás opened up a treasure trove of Hungarian folk music to the world, unearthed the lost Jewish music of Transylvania, and recorded an album of melodies collected by Béla Bartók. As a solo artist, their former singer Márta Sebestyén rose to star status through the rock opera *Stephen the King* and her songs for the Oscar-winning *The English Patient*.<sup>49</sup> Muzsikás and Márta

46 = = ÁBTL 1.11.1. 45-13/16/1979. Experiences of hostile activities on the basis of a nationalist platform. The effectiveness of our countermeasures and our further tasks, October 4, 1979.

47 = = MNL OL M-KS 288/22/1980/52. Discussion paper on the state of the amateur art movement, October 1980 and Resolution on some topical issues of youth entertainment, January 1980.

48 = = *About this term: Sándor Révész, Aczél és korunk [Aczél and our Era]* (Sík, 1997), 144–184., 193–265; Melinda Kalmár, *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer 1945–1990 [In the Pull of the Historical Galaxies: Hungary and the Soviet System 1945–1990]* (Osiris, 2014), 251–285; 354–370.

49 = = *The English Patient*, directed by Anthony Minghella (1996) [https://videa.hu/videok/film-animacio/az\\_ngol-b\\_teg-movie233.-drama-romantikus-o8TcYz8F1MSadRoM](https://videa.hu/videok/film-animacio/az_ngol-b_teg-movie233.-drama-romantikus-o8TcYz8F1MSadRoM); *István a király [Stephen the King]*, written by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy, directed by Gábor Koltay (1983) [https://videa.hu/videok/film-animacio/istvan-a-kiraly\\_1983-film-animacio-oLEWoeBa5bktlYrg](https://videa.hu/videok/film-animacio/istvan-a-kiraly_1983-film-animacio-oLEWoeBa5bktlYrg)

Sebestyén played the WOMAD Festival in 1991, and Muzsikás won the WOMEX world music award in 2008.<sup>50</sup>

The Hungarian folk music movement has been racing against time ever since the early 1900s field works of Bartók and Kodály. The key issue has been to seek out elderly “data providers”: the genuine sources of the authentic music and dance traditions from the times when they were alive. That is why the ’60s and ’70s collectors set out so determinedly to preserve the music on tape and the dances on film. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Folk Art also played a role in the scientific research and preservation of the collected material and in making it accessible. After the political transition, the latter became the Hungarian Heritage House (*Hagyományok Háza*), where Béla Halmos established a Dance House Archive (*Táncház Archivum*). Ferenc Sebő became the art director of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble (*Magyar Állami Népi Együttes*) and later the professional director of the Heritage House. Thanks to them and their predecessors, pundits, peers and followers, folklorists and ethnomusicologists, collectors, choreographers, and, of course, the musicians and dancers who resurrected and revived the traditions, the *táncház* (dance house) method as a Hungarian model for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011.<sup>51</sup>

In Budapest, not far from the former FMH (no longer standing), Fonó, a folk and world music venue, opened in 1995 and founded an independent record label of the same name. It was the second one on the scene after Etnofon, founded by Ferenc Kiss (Kolinda, Vízöntő) in 1992.<sup>52</sup> The most ambitious Fonó project between 1997 and 2001 was *Utolsó óra* (Last Hour). Unlike their predecessors who made field recordings, they invited village musicians from Hungary and neighboring countries to Budapest. Over a hundred string bands worked in their studio, and in addition to hundreds of hours of high-quality recordings, gigs were also organized for them. Nearly seventy CDs of these recordings have been released. Now, their only enemies were time and money—not state security.

50 = = For the award of Muzsikás, see “Muzsikás Folk Music of Hungary,” Muzsikás, <http://www.muzsikasband.com/en> and “Womex review—Sevilla/ Spain 2008—WOMEX,” WOMEX, [https://www.womex.com/virtual/sonic\\_pages\\_vienna/news/womex\\_review\\_sevilla](https://www.womex.com/virtual/sonic_pages_vienna/news/womex_review_sevilla)

51 = = “UNESCO—Táncház method: a Hungarian model for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage,” UNESCO World Heritage, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/BSP/tanchaz-method-a-hungarian-model-for-the-transmission-of-intangible-cultural-heritage-00515>.

52 = = The four-CD album, *Vetettem gyöngyöt. Világzene Magyarországon 1972–2006* [I Sowed Pearls. Hungarian World Music 1972–2006] (Etnofon Records, 2007), offers valuable liner notes and a wide selection of music. Ferenc Kiss (1954–2024).



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Hungarian Record Production Company, quality control. 1970.

Fortepan

### **Keywords**

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*Dance House Movement, Folk Revival Movement, Kádár-era, Magyar nóta*