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The Confiscation of the Landholdings of the Reformed Church in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County (1945–1952)²

Abstract.

In my study, I examine how the newly established communist government in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, located in the central part of Hungary, deprives the congregations of their landholdings, which are one of their most important financial bases. As a result of increasing pressure from the party-state, the “nationalization” of the church lands took place gradually, up until 1951, when all remaining areas had to be offered to the state for “purchase”, under strictly fixed conditions. During the process, congregations lost their financial independence and became vulnerable to state funding.

Keywords: forced nationalization of landholdings, confiscation of church lands, abolition of the financial independence of churches

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From 1945 onwards, the state sought to gradually marginalize and eventually disrupt the churches, a decisive part of this process being the liquidation of the churches' material basis, assets, and institutions. The nationalization of church land from 1945 on, lasting until 1951, the takeover of the vast majority of church schools by the state in the summer of 1948, followed by the nationalization of church buildings, tenement buildings and business facilities, the termination of church associations and foundations, the expropriation of their assets and their transfer to state control played a decisive role in this process.³ As an integral part of the process, the state also targeted to eliminate the bourgeois and wealthy peasant class that supported the churches with substantial donations, and thus, deprived of their wealth and income, they could no longer assume this role.⁴ The land owned by congregations was of fundamental importance in the life of the Reformed Church, as it was also used to cover the salaries, i.e. the remuneration of pastors, cantors, and bell-ringers,⁵ and the maintenance of various educational, social and health institutions and the staff's salaries, were financed by the income from land donated by private individuals through foundations set up for this purpose. In my paper, I will try to capture this process in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, whose activity was terminated in the summer of 1952.⁶ I will describe the process in more detail using the example of one of the country's most prosperous Reformed congregations,

3 See more in: Rigó, Róbert (2022a): A reformátusok vagyonának államosítása Kecskeméten. In: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor: *Hagyomány, Identitás, Történelem 2021*. Budapest, KRE HTK Egyháztörténeti Kutatóintézet. 253–286.

4 RIGÓ, Róbert (2022b): Pártállami „szociográfia” a hatvanas évek vallási életéről. In: *Forrás*. 2022/2. 28–64.

5 The pastors' remuneration included the cash allowance determined by the session, the stole fee (the fee paid by the congregants to the pastor after a funeral or a baptism), the benefits in kind, which usually consisted of the parsonage and garden, the land or its rent, often firewood and other benefits in kind to a certain extent (pork, fat, poultry, eggs, honey, etc.).

6 The Kecskemét Reformed Church County stretched to the western part of the present-day Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County, the southern part of Pest County, and the eastern part of Bács-Kiskun County, as far as the disputed Kiskunhalas. In 1952, the old districts were wound up and, in the interests of administrative controllability and state administration, were adjusted to the county boundaries established in 1950. The process involved the replacement of deans, the retirement and transfer of pastors. See more: KOVÁCS, Bálint (2006): *A kecskeméti szolgálat évei 1942–1957*. Kecskemét, Emmaus. 84–91.

the Kecskemét Reformed Congregation, and will also discuss the Danubian Reformed Church District.

After the advance of the Red Army in East-Central Europe and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, church leaders expected that the operation of the churches in the new regime would worsen since they had already experienced the church policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which had followed the Soviet model and established a communist dictatorship a quarter of a century earlier.⁷ Already at that time, the Office for the Liquidation of Religious Affairs was established, with the primary aim of confiscating church property, thus accelerating the crippling of the churches.⁸ According to a decree, a liquidation committee sent by the local councils could take all movable and immovable property from the congregations, except sacred buildings and objects. Thus, churches, chapels, and prayer houses were not nationalized, but manses and other church-owned buildings were. In the manses, the pastors could continue to stay as tenants, but in more than one case other people were moved in with them.⁹ The churches were already severely affected by the land policy of the communist dictatorship, according to which the congregation had to hand over all agricultural land exceeding 100 acres to the local government. The holdings of church foundations and associations were also nationalized. The confiscation of church property resulted in very different practices in different local communities: in some places, everything was left as it was, while others sought to nationalize almost all movable and immovable property, even the church, the prayer house, or the pastor's personal belongings. The role of the local directorates and the identity of those who carried out the inventory proved decisive in this process.¹⁰

⁷ At the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed, and two-thirds of the territory of historic Hungary was annexed by neighbouring countries. The country's form of government changed from a kingdom to a republic in the autumn of 1918 and then to a communist-controlled soviet republic from 21 March 1919 to 1 August, when it became a kingdom again.

⁸ CSÜRÖS András (2021): *Református egyházi élet a Tanácsköztársaság idején. A magyar reformátusság egy válságos korszakban*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L'Harmattan Kiadó. 64–67; RIGÓ, Róbert (2023): Kecskeméti reformátusok a forradalmak idején (1918–1922). In: *Forrás*. 2023/7–8. 91–121.

⁹ FAZEKAS, Csaba (1997): A „Vallásügyi Likvidáló Hivatal” 1919-ben. In: Pölöskei, Ferenc – Stemler, Gyula (eds.): *A múltból a jövőbe. Tanulmányok*. Budapest, ELTE BTK. 83.

¹⁰ CSÜRÖS 2021, 92.

In the early spring of 1945, the fights were still going on in Hungary when the new land law was published under pressure exerted by Vorosilov, the Soviet chairman of the Allied Control Committee, mainly in order to strengthen the social acceptance of the Soviet occupation.¹¹ In Hungary, the unequal social distribution of land had been an unsolved problem for decades, leading to increasing social tensions between the two world wars, so land distribution was necessary, but it was not carried out with economic interests and ecclesiastical considerations in mind. The post-war situation was described by Bishop László Ravasz at the April 1945 meeting of the Danubian Reformed Church District as follows: “The world has never seen a more unscrupulous, unwise, and evil policy. Now here is the result: the capital city destroyed, capital and industry confiscated and scattered, the land unclaimed and uncultivated, and a helpless chaos which may soon be like a brawling mob striking the torch of the mongrel and giving the signal: finders keepers.”¹² László Ravasz blamed the politics during World War II, especially after the Arrow Cross takeover, for the consequences of the German and then Soviet occupation, for the country’s transformation into a theatre of war and the chaotic situation, for the German and then the Soviet raids.

Local, municipal land-claiming committees took a total of 5.6 million acres, 35% of all land, from its former owner, creating state farms on some of it, and 3.2 million acres were distributed among some 642,000 claimants in parcels averaging five acres, thus winding up large private and church-owned estates.¹³ In practice, the reorganization of land ownership was completed within a few weeks and went hand in hand with numerous abuses: for example, the Dél-Pest County Land-Claiming Committee stated on 21 January 1946, “The actions of some committee members in the allocation of land were so aberrant that they seriously endangered the implementation of the land reform and its public interest not only in Kecskemét but also nationwide.” In many cases, the

¹¹ In 1935, 85% of the landowners had less than 10 acres and held 20% of the total land, while the large landowners, who held 0.2% of the land, held 30% of the total land. ROMSICS, Ignác (2001): *Magyarország története a XX. században*. Budapest, Osiris. 283–284.

¹² KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, box 91, 60/1945. Excerpt from the report of Bishop László Ravasz, 10 April 1945.

¹³ ROMSICS 2001, 284. [The translations of all, originally non-English quotations belong to the author Augusta Szász.]

members of the land-claiming committees arbitrarily redistributed land already allocated, allocated land to those who were not entitled to it, exchanged allocated land, failed to document changes in ownership, accepted gifts from claimants and even demanded them.¹⁴

The lay landowners received symbolic compensation for the expropriation of their estates, but the churches could not expect any compensation, and in addition to the land, the equipment, the remaining livestock, and the farm buildings were also taken away. Article 50 of the Decree of the Temporary National Government (M. E. 600/1945) allowed churches to retain their land as benefice, and Article 17 allowed the Church to keep ownership of land for cultural and public foundation purposes, up to a maximum of 100 acres on the basis of a decision of a three-member committee.¹⁵

Many abuses were possible under Article 12 of the Decree, according to which if there was not enough land available locally, the National Land Settlement Council decided that the entire land plot could be allocated, in which case the maximum 100

¹⁴ For example, the chairman of the Kecskemét Land-Claiming Committee, Ferenc Szabó, was suspended in August 1946 because Mrs Jenő Gyuris, who appeared before the County Land Settlement Council, said that her husband had been allocated 10 acres of land, and then “when he received the ownership deed, Ferenc Szabó demanded that they give him 15 kg of beans and a litre of milk a day for the land. They gave the milk to Ferenc Szabó for 3 months, and when they were informed by the other land claimants that they were not obliged to provide these services, Ferenc Szabó reduced the allowance to 4 acres. His daughter, Gyuláné Csikós received 1.5 acres of vineyards, from whom Szabó demanded 500 pengő, 1 litre of brandy and a piglet. She could not give him the pig, so Ferenc Szabó took the grapes from them after the harvest.” RIGÓ, Róbert (2014): *Elitváltások évtizede Kecskeméten*. Budapest – Pécs, ÁBTL – Kronosz. 305.

¹⁵ Decree No 17. §-Article 17 states that “a committee of three members, composed of delegates from the Ministries of Agriculture, Public Welfare and Education and Religious Affairs and acting with the assistance of experts, shall be responsible for reviewing all special-purpose land to determine whether the cultural or foundation purpose is in the public interest, the amount of land required to achieve it and whether the cultural institution or foundation has other sources of income that make the land nonessential. If the aforementioned committee finds that the cultural or foundation purpose is not in the public interest, the foundation land shall be used in its entirety. Any land in excess of the area of land required to achieve the purpose (which shall not exceed 100 acres), or the entire land in the case of the purpose being satisfied from other sources of income, shall also be bought off.” ROMSICS, Ignác (ed.) (2000): *Magyar történelmi szöveggyűjtemény 1914–1999*. Budapest, Osiris. Vol. I. 392.

acres had to be allocated elsewhere.¹⁶ The practical implementation of the land reform usually depended on the intentions of the local and county land distribution committees. On 2 July 1945, the National Land Settlement Council issued a decision in principle on church land matters, which made it virtually impossible for the church to own land for keeping up its institutions. The resolution also stated that where the land under congregation ownership reached 30 acres, the church could not claim any more land, and that in towns where there were several congregations, the total area of land owned by the church could amount to 100 acres at most.¹⁷ This also meant that congregations that had no land at all, or only less than 30 acres, could claim more until reaching the said overall surface. The Council of the Danubian Reformed Church District had already drawn the attention of the deans to this possibility after its meeting on 10 April 1945 so that these congregations could apply for land or for a property supplement.¹⁸

Thus, the Temporary National Government practically ordered the expropriation and division of ecclesiastical land exceeding 100 acres, similarly to the regulations in the Soviet Republic. We can distinguish three stages in the nationalization of the Reformed Church's estates: the first took place immediately after World War II in 1945–46, the second between 1948 and the spring of 1951, and the third in the summer and fall of 1951, when almost all church estates had to be “offered” to the state.

Countrywide, the Reformed Church owned 102,000 acres before 1945, out of which 54,056 acres had been appropriated by the end of the first phase. According to the

¹⁶ According to Article 12 of the Decree, “100 acres up to 100–1,000 acres, and irrespective of their size, the land estates of jurisdictions, municipalities, and churches, and, subject to the outcome of the procedure described in Article 17, 100 acres of agricultural property in foundation estates are exempt from redemption. If, however, the land available for distribution in a commune or distribution group is insufficient in relation to the number of claimants, the National Land Settlement Council may order the entire land holdings of the natural person affected by the redemption to be claimed. In such a case, the redeemed person shall be allocated 100 acres of land of the same quality in another part of the country.” ROMSICS 2000, 391.

¹⁷ HORVÁTH, Gergely Krisztián (2018): *Szovjetizálás és ellenállás a Veszprémi egyházmegyében, Dr. Kögl Lénárd pályája az 1940–1960-as években*. Budapest, MTA BTK TTI. 47–49. The full text of the Decision can be found in *Annex 1* – op. cit. 233–235.

¹⁸ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Church County, box 91, 39/1945. Confidential Excerpt from the meeting of the Danubian Reformed Church District Council, 10 April 1945.

Covenant minutes of 15–16 April 1947, more than half of the land, 25,617 acres had been taken from 139 congregations, and 28,439 acres from 36 institutions and foundations.¹⁹ In the course of the land distribution, a total of 1,184 acres were allocated to 71 congregations and one foundation. The total loss of the Reformed Church in the 1945 land confiscation was 52,872 acres.²⁰ Nearly half of the estate was still kept. Between 1945 and 1948, instead of compensation, the financial government paid income supplemental state aid and congruent aid to clergymen,²¹ and after 1948, the amount of state aid was set by an agreement with the Reformed Church.²²

In Hungarian historiography, the nationalization of church land before the change of regime was deemed “necessary” in order to “abolish any feudal privileges” of the church. In 1985, Jenő Gergely, referring to progress, considered the seizure of church lands as necessary due to civilization, democratization, and secularization. After the fall of communism, studies were carried out on the process in the individual bishoprics,

¹⁹ The Roman Catholic Church was even more adversely affected by land confiscation, as 765,684 acres of its land were nationalized in 1945, leaving 111,759 acres. The reason for this is that the Roman Catholic Church had more extensive diocesan and archdiocesan estates. For example, before the land reform, the Bishopric of Veszprém had 50,513 acres, and the Veszprém Chapter had 47,683 acres, the income from which was used to maintain religious, cultural, and educational institutions as special-purpose assets. In the field of education, there were two teacher-training colleges, seven junior high schools and 564 elementary schools, as well as the seminary of Veszprém. After the “land reform”, the diocese had a total of 655 acres, only 0.6 % of the previous land holdings. HORVÁTH 2018, 45–61.

²⁰ FODORNÉ NAGY, Sarolta (2006): *Történelmi lecke. A Magyar Köztársaság és a Magyarországi Református Egyház között 1948-ban létrejött „Egyezmény” megkötésének körülményei és hatása különös tekintettel a nevelésre.* Budapest–Nagykőrös, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület. 153.

²¹ The issues of the congrua and state aid are in many ways intertwined, but there are also significant differences between them. The congrua meant a decent financial provision for pastors and teachers, which the state was expected to provide if the congregation could not. State aid was a budgetary resource in case of need and was divided into four forms: supplementary income, investment, school and church aid. There was considerable debate about what the state could expect in return and whether it could be acceptable at all. See more: KOVÁCS, Kálmán Árpád (2016): *Az államsegélyes egyházpolitika és a reformátusok a századfordulón (1868–1898).* In: Ujváry, Gábor (ed.): *VERITAS Évkönyv 2015.* Budapest, VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet – Magyar Napló. 13–28.

²² BALOGH, Margit (1997): *A demokratizálódás kudarca(i).* In: Kollega Tarsoly, István (EIC): *Magyarország története a XX. században.* Vol. II. Szekszárd, Babits Kiadó. 374–405.

dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church, but a national synthesis is yet to be carried out.²³ In the case of the Reformed Church, there were a few case studies on the subject in the last year.²⁴

The Reformed Church tried to protect its interests, preserve its landholdings within the limits of the law at various levels. In the following, I will discuss how and to what extent land was nationalized in the first period between 1945 and 1946 and what steps were taken by the church districts, church counties, the congregation of Kecskemét, and the session of Szeremle, a small village south of Baja, to protect their land.

Reactions of the Danubian Reformed Church District to the Nationalization of Church Land

The Bishop of the Danubian Reformed Church District, László Ravasz, wrote to the Dean of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, József Jóba, on 20 April 1945, enclosing “for information in full confidence” the letter of the district presidency to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Agriculture, and the National Land Settlement Council “concerning the land reform”. He recorded that the district estate amounting to 5,000 acres had been taken away without any prior consultation, which the district had “either obtained from the pious donations of individual congregants or purchased with sums collected very frugally from the pennies of the congregants, mostly simple poor people, to secure the material existence of the church as a physical prerequisite for its great ministry”. They stated that the church leadership considers a fairer distribution of land as an important task, accepting that the implementation of the decree, which was quickly promulgated without prior consultation, has begun, but requested fairness, which “the cultural and national importance of our church deserves”. They stressed that:

²³ One of the most significant studies on the subject is the first 110 pages of Gergely Krisztián Horváth’s volume on the Diocese of Veszprém, as well as BÁNKUTI, Gábor (2012): *Mozaikok a Pécsi Egyházmegye életéből 1948–1951. között*. In: Bánkuti, Gábor – Varga, Szabolcs – Vértesi, Lázár (eds.): *A 20. század egyház- és társadalomtörténetének metszéspontjai. Tanulmányok a Pécsi Egyházmegye 20. századi történetéből*. Pécs, Pécsi Püspöki Hittudományi Főiskola, 205–221.

²⁴ See the studies by Éva Bíró, Sarolta Fodorné Nagy, and Róbert Rigó referenced herein.

we believe it is crucial that the government adopts the position that all church property is a trust [...]. The church is first and foremost a targeted system since it is a set of ministries and missions. Therefore, we can say that all the property of the church is a special trust, and we ask that each and every church property be treated accordingly and with benevolence. This is, of course, even more so of all those parts of the property whose purpose is historically laid down in charters or deeds of donation and wills.²⁵

On 1 May 1945, László Ravasz informed the deans that negotiations were being held with the government on the distribution of church land, explaining the harmful consequences of the decree and asked for compensation for the church. Five thousand acres of land in the church district had already been distributed, and only three estates had been reported to have retained 100 acres each. These measures were challenged by the church district. The situation was aggravated by the fact that they were unable to contact the users of the land, the local government, or the tenants. The bishop stated that the existence of the theological seminary of the district was “threatened by the most serious danger”; the seat had suffered damage of 2-300 thousand pengő. Income from the estates was lost because the tenants had been robbed during the passage of the front line. The church had no income and could not pay its employees. At that time, the only income that could be counted was the payment of district annuities by the congregations that were able to do so at all. The Bishop recorded that “We have intervened several times in the strongest form with the state government on the matters of the congrua,²⁶ seniority benefit, and state aids in general.” The government promised to pay, but due to lack of funds, it could not. The bishop’s report published in June stated that the

²⁵ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Church County, box 91, 32/1945. László Ravasz’s letter to Dean József Jóba, 20 April 1945.

²⁶ The word *congrua* comes from the Latin *sustentatio congrua* ‘adequate provision’ – when the clerical position was not accompanied by adequate remuneration, it was supplemented by the state. In secularized states, it is an important instrument of state power over the clergy. After the nationalization of church lands, clergymen lost their means of subsistence, and therefore the *congrua* played a decisive role in their subsistence. After 1951, the State Office for Church Affairs assigned pastors on a personal basis, and its disbursement or withdrawal was an important instrument of power. *Katolikus lexikon*. Available at: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/K/kongrua.html>.

position of pastors' entitled to a congrua was considered by the government an official position, aligned with the pay grades of civil servants. Church schools received a salary supplement from the state because teachers' land was also nationalized.²⁷ With the confiscation of church land – even before the nationalization of schools in 1948 –, they were in a difficult financial situation, with no prospects in many places. The bishop again stated, "I regret to point out the total financial ruin of the church counties of the Danubian District." The Bishop also recorded that 16 pastors of the church district had not yet returned to their places of ministry, seven had been arrested or interned, and nine had been taken prisoners of war. In July, the congrua started to be paid, so that many had some income for the first time in months.²⁸

In his bishop's report dated 22 November 1945, Ravasz dealt specifically with the land reform, describing that the Church considered it necessary to distribute land more fairly, but they could not imagine that the state would "expropriate up to 100 acres of land belonging to churches, foundations, and schools, a land reform which makes economic equipment and facilities, farm buildings erected at great expense redundant, a land reform which offers practically no compensation".²⁹ He also recorded that of the 5,400 acres of the district, 300 were retained in principle, but in actual fact there were only 100 acres left.

²⁷ Point 7/c and point 9 of the state's agreement with the Reformed of 7 October 1948 also dealt with the cantor-teachers' land. Accordingly, the cantor's salary land for cantoral duties remained the property of the church. ERDŐS, Kristóf (2011): A Magyar Köztársaság és a Magyarországi Református Egyház 1948-as egyezményének vizsgálata. In: J. Újváry, Zsuzsanna (ed.): *Összekötnek az évezredek.* (Pázmány Történelmi Műhely Történelmi Tanulmányok, 3). Budapest – Piliscsaba, Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Történettudományi Intézet – Szent István Társulat. 323.

²⁸ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Church County, box 92, 82/1945. Status Report of the Danubian Reformed Church District, May–July 1945.

²⁹ László Ravasz's 23rd and 24th Bishop's Reports (22 November 1945) in: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor (eds.) (2023): *Ravasz 100, Püspöki jelentések.* Budapest, Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület – KRE HTK ETKI – Kálvin Kiadó. 409.

Nationalization of Congregation Estates in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County

On 28 June 1946, the Universal Covenant asked the deans to send a statement of the extent to which land confiscation had affected the congregations in their church counties.³⁰ They also asked for a report if a congregation had acquired land. The dean then asked the congregations for a statement on the matter, and the data was aggregated. In the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, the following areas were nationalized in 1945: 44 acres in Abony, all the land was taken away, so here the congregation did not have any of the land as required by the Decree. In Cegléd, 730 acres and 375 fathoms³¹ were nationalized (of which school endowment land was 275 acres and 938 fathoms). In Kecskemét, 404 acres and 470 fathoms of land were taken from the congregation and distributed. In Kiskunhalas, 2,492 acres were nationalized, the largest amount of land in the church county; the second largest was in Nagykőrös, 1,736 acres and 452 fathoms of land. In Dévaványa, the church county owned 94 acres and 934 fathoms of land, which were fully nationalized. A total of 5,501 acres and 924 fathoms of land were confiscated from the church county and its congregations during the 1945 land confiscation. Four congregations received land: Kiskunfélegyháza: 25 acres, Prónayfalva, later Tázlár: 15 acres, Szolnok: 30 acres, and Újszász: 15 acres – 85 acres in total. No land was seized in the congregations of Jászberény, Jászkisér, Kerekegyháza, Soltvadkert, Tiszavárkony, and Tószeg, but they did not receive any either. Prónayfalva (Tázlár) was dependent on the congregation of Soltvadkert as a filial church, where the 252 acres of the estate of the Budapest Reformed Theological Academy, legacy of Szathmáry Sándorné, were taken away, and the congregation received 15 acres of it. In Kiskőrös, the session applied for land, but their application was rejected.

Rev. Benjámin Ván of Kishunhalas wrote in detail about the land that was taken away. The congregation owned 191 acres in the Balota plain, 910 acres in the Debeák Szarkás plains, of which 500 acres were forest, 10 vineyards and orchards, 155 acres in the

³⁰ In the future, it would be worthwhile to search for these church county reports in the Synodal Archives and in the county archives.

³¹ A fathom was a unit of land, each side of a fathom being one fathom, i.e. 189 centimetres, equivalent to 3.6 square meters, a juger/jugerum being 1,600 fathoms.

Felsőkistelek plains, of which 18 vineyards and 7 orchards. There was a castle on the estate featuring a large cellar, 1,200 hl of wine storage capacity, holding 300 hl of wine, modern winegrowing equipment, 9 horses, and 20 cattle; another 12 acres in the Pirtó plains, 10 acres of the precentorial meadows by the town, and 5 acres of gardens in the Sziget area. There were 240 acres of glebe in the Balota plains and another 43 acres in the Füzes plain. Significant estates were also taken from the church endowments: 29 acres from the orphanage foundation, 897 acres on the outskirts of Kiskunfélegyháza, “an endowment estate owned by the Reformed public redemptive estate of Kiskunhalas, and the perpetual usufructuary was the Szilády Áron Reformed Secondary School in Kiskunhalas, with the proviso that if this school should for any reason lose its Reformed character, the usufruct would cease and revert to the Reformed public redemptive commonage of Kiskunhalas”. Benjamin Ván listed the remaining church estates; the congregation was not left with 100 acres, which was challenged against in vain. So, here, too, the law was not observed: instead of 100 acres, one was left for the glebe, and 291 acres were left for the foundation instead of the 100 allowed, although a large part of this was poor-quality sandy land.

The pastors of Nagykőrös reported that 698 acres and 213 fathoms of land in the outskirts of the town, another 42 acres and 1,482 fathoms in the outskirts of the nearby Jászkarajenő, and 135 acres and 657 fathoms of land in the outskirts of Dánszentmiklós, making a total of 876 acres and 452 fathoms of land, were taken from the congregation. The boarding school of Arany János High School had another 860 acres of land, which was encumbered by a surviving spouse’s usufruct, but this was also claimed, so a total of 1,736 acres and 452 fathoms were nationalized. The congregation was left 100 acres, including the two pastors’ glebes. They left the 8 acres of endowment land of Jenő Dóczy, 1/3 of which belonged to the high school, and Cs. Kiss’s land amounting to 38 acres, which belonged to the teacher-training school foundation. The inter-ministerial committee of three granted 100 acres of land to the teacher-training institute; the session had requested that 62 acres of the endowment land in Dánszentmiklós be kept, but they had not yet been informed.

Rev. László Kővári from Kocsér reported that the 51 acres of plough land of Ambrus V. Farago’s endowment, which he had established for the material needs of the local church, were “saved by declaring 41 acres as glebe, 5 acres as precentorial land, and 5 acres as bell-ringer’s land, which was approved by the local body of the Land Settlement

Committee”. The Szolnok Reformed Congregation applied for and received 15 acres of glebe, 10 acres of precentorial and 5 acres of bell-ringer’s land, a total of 30 acres, which they were to repay over twenty years, but they were unable to pay the first instalment because of financial difficulties.³²

It is clear from these cases that the local land-claiming committees had very different practices regarding the nationalization of church land. For example, in Abony, no land was left at all, not even the legal minimum; in Kiskunhalas, more than 100 acres of endowment land was left – at the same time, the congregation’s property land was not secured; in Nagykőrös, more than twice 100 acres of land was left. In Kiskőrös, the session applied for land in vain, but did not receive it, while in Szolnok the pastor, the cantor, and the bell-ringer were also provided with land as benefice.³³

Nationalization of the Estates of the Kecskemét Reformed Congregation

In 1930, Kecskemét was the fourth most densely populated city in the country. The town had extensive suburban areas. In 1941, 59% of its 87,269 inhabitants and in 1949 62.3% of its 88,369 inhabitants lived in suburban farms.³⁴ In 1950, Kecskemét became the seat of the newly created Bács-Kiskun County. At the same time, a good part of its outskirts was annexed, so the city’s area decreased by more than 70% and its population by 35%.³⁵ In the separated areas, nine new villages were created to serve as

³² KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, box 93, 307/1946. Statement on the effects of land reorganization in the Church County of Kecskemét. June 1946.

³³ The 57 congregations of the Vértessalja Reformed Church County owned 2,200 acres of land, but due to the predominance of large estates during the land reform, there was a relative “land abundance”, i.e. more land was available for distribution, so 77 acres were taken from the congregations and 287 were given to them.³³ László Ravasz’s 25th Bishop’s Report (21 November 1946) in: KISS – LÁNYI 2023, 466.

³⁴ RIGÓ, Róbert (2016): Kecskemét helye a városhierarchiában és társadalmi változások a népszámlálások tükrében. In: *Forrás*. 2016/7–8. 81–84.

³⁵ In the outskirts of Kecskemét, in 1950, Bugac, Lakitelek, and Nyárlőrinc became independent settlements; in 1952, Ágasegyháza, Helvécia, Hetényegyháza, Szentkirály, and Városvölgy; in 1954, Ballószög. SZILÁGYI, Zsolt (2019): Mezőváros a tervszalonon. Az 1957. évi kecskeméti Várorendezési

supply centres for the surrounding farms.³⁶ The Kecskemét Reformed Congregation had been building up an extensive educational system from 1564; besides the high school, a college was established in the 1830s, but seminary was transferred to Pest in the 1850s, followed by the law academy in the 1860s and the teacher-training college in 1918. By the end of the Horthy era, the congregation's most significant income came from the rent of shops, business premises and tenement houses downtown and from church taxes, at which time the landholding amounted to 507 acres. The land usually got into the ownership of the congregation as bequests or endowments. The yield from the land was not a major source of income for the budget, but it was more important for the pastors, the cantor's salary, and the boarding school students' meals.³⁷

Already during the Soviet occupation, the congregation's farms suffered significant losses. In December 1944, Rev. Bálint Kovács reported to the mayor of the town that the congregation had 20 horses, 28 carts, 45 cattle, 160 pigs on their 507-juger property and that they had a model farm in Talfa and Szentkirály. Kovács wrote that during his visit on 5 December, after the passing of the front, the farms had only four or five cows and calves and eight pigs, and no horses, leaving most of the land unploughed and barren. The church was supposed to pay the wages of 50 men, but all that was left was the money in the mite box, barely enough to pay for anything.³⁸

On 10 April 1945, on behalf of the congregation of Kecskemét, Dr Gyula Joó, the Chief Elder, and Rev. Bálint Kovács wrote a petition to the local claiming committee, in which they stated that they had received information about the seizure and distribution of their lands. They requested that this process be stopped, the allotment of the lands be cancelled, and "all our properties be left in our ownership and possession undisturbed".

terv rekonstrukciója, illetve történeti földrajzi (szekuláris) kontextusa. In: Horváth, Gergely Krisztián (ed.): *Vakvágány. A „szocializmus alapjainak lerakása” vidéken a hosszú ötvenes években* 2. Budapest, MTA BTK – NEB. 436.

³⁶ BELÉNYI, Gyula (1996): *Az alföldi városok és a településpolitika (1945–1963)* (Dél-alföldi évszázadok 7). Szeged. 38.

³⁷ SZABADOS, László (2000): *A Kecskeméti Református Kollégium története 1945-től az 1948-as államosításig*. Kecskemét, Kecskeméti Református Kollégium Gimnáziuma. 46–47.

³⁸ KREL, Administrative church documents III/I., box 19, 1944–1945, 156. Bálint Kovács's Report to the mayor, dated December 1944.

It was then argued that the vast majority of the congregations' total land area, 344 and a half acres out of the 507 acres, was endowment land. These were listed in itemized form, with the donor and purpose of the trust. Most of the endowment estates were left to the church after death by persons closely connected to the church, such as chief elders and elders, mainly for educational and social purposes. For example, in the Kisfái plains, the property of 17 acres of 954 fathoms was bequeathed to the congregation by the late Chief Elder László Szeless, by a separate testamentary deed, as endowment for the care of the pastors' widows and orphans. The 50-juger estate of Balázs Györffy in Talfa was bequeathed by the late Chief Elder for educational purposes. The Hankovszky grove in the built-in area of Hunyadváros was bequeathed by Elder Zsigmond Hankovszky in the form of an 8-juger-815-fathom endowment for the maintenance of the teacher-training school. The 16 acres of 1,328 fathoms in the Talfája plains were the endowment estate for the cantor's remuneration, and a 16-juger estate there served the cultural and charitable purposes of the Bodor Zsuzsánna Girls' Home.

The other category of endowment estates was donated to the congregation by the city of Kecskemét for the purposes of education and pastors' salaries. The town of Kecskemét donated half of the 61 acres of 1,402 fathoms in the Talfája plains, the so-called "Kezeshévesi estate", to the congregation for school and boarding purposes. In the farm centres around the town, the town donated 30 acres in Méntelke, Kadafalva, and Szentkirály as benefice for the local pastors. In Szentkirály, 70 acres of the 116 acres received by the congregation in the 1920 Land Reform were granted for the remuneration of pastors serving in the town. In the Csáktornya vineyard, two acres and 1,402 fathoms of vines were provided for the remuneration of the local pastors. With regard to the endowment estates, it was hoped at that time that they would be retained for their cultural and educational purpose because, according to their reasoning, "All these endowment estates serve such noble religious and philanthropic purposes that they will undoubtedly be exempted from redemption by the committee to be set up pursuant to paragraph 17 of Decree 600/1945, all the more because these purposes cannot be achieved in any other ways given the scarcity of our congregations' funds and because the individual properties are all less than 100 acres." Finally, it was recorded that the properties in the built-in area exceeding 16 acres, on which the schools, tenements, and buildings were located, and the cemetery occupying 9 acres, were exempt from the official requisition. This left 144 acres

to the church, of which 100 acres were exempt under the Decree, with the additional 44 acres requested to be exempted to ease the church's cultural burdens.³⁹

On 3 May, the congregation of Kecskemét filed an appeal to the superior body, the County Land Settlement Council, as the local land-claiming committee had nationalized all but 100 of the 507 acres. They asked that the church land be exempted and retained in the church's property. Again, the appeal described the 344 and a half acres of endowment land as "being endowment donated for various purposes and at various times by various persons". It was noted that since all endowment estates were under 100 acres, each estate was exempt under the Decree. Pastoral and precentorial glebes were also exempted as special-purpose properties. "Besides, paragraph 17 of the Decree requires a special committee to decide on them." These lands could therefore not be used until the committee was set up. Exemption of the remaining 144 acres is requested under Article 12 of the Decree. Finally, it was explained that the will of the endowment holders would also be annulled by the nationalization and distribution of these estates, as "it would be unfair to make use of these small endowment estates, also because they were established by faithful members of the church, common men without exception, attached to our church, from their hard-earned wealth. In this way, they sought to establish a lasting memorial of their gratitude to their church."⁴⁰

According to the report compiled in the summer of 1946, the Reformed congregation of Kecskemét was deprived of the endowment property established from the donations of six private individuals, which amounted to a total of 160 acres and 105 fathoms. A further 130 acres of land, which served as the benefice of the farm pastorates on the outskirts of the town, were seized and put at the disposal of the church by the town. An additional 114 acres and 365 fathoms were taken from the congregation's property, for a total of 404 acres and 470 fathoms.⁴¹ According to a later statement, the

³⁹ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Church County, box 91, 33/1945. Letter on behalf of the congregation of Kecskemét from Dr Gyula Joó, Chief Elder, and Rev. Bálint Kovács to the local land-claiming committee, dated 10 April 1945.

⁴⁰ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, box 91, 36/1945. Appeal of the congregation of Kecskemét to the County Land Settlement Council, 3 May 1945.

⁴¹ KREL, Documents of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County, box 93, 307/1946. Report on the effects of land reorganization in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County. June 1946.

1945 land confiscation took 313 acres of 2,550 gold crowns (hereafter AK) of pure income land from the congregation.⁴²

This uncertainty may have been due to years of dispute over the status of estates. In the following years, the main problem was that, although several petitions were filed to exempt endowment lands from nationalization, claiming that they were less than 100 acres and that the income from the land was used to maintain their schools, no satisfactory solution to the ownership problem could be found. During 1945, the congregation made several petitions for exemption from the nationalization of the endowment lands but usually received no response. On 12 April 1946, the Finance and Agriculture Committee of the Session of the congregation recorded the current situation of the church lands, according to which 66 acres in the Belső-Talfája were rented to three tenant farmers on condition that all obligations of service be fulfilled jointly. The estate in Külső-Talfája was divided, but the new owners had not yet occupied it, so the church took it over. The benefice of pastors' widows was not divided, the orchard in Kisnyír was divided but not yet occupied by the new owners, and the 30-juger estate in Szentkirály was not yet seized. Kálmán Csikai requested that the session give him other 10 acres of land instead of the 10 acres seized during the Méntelek land distribution, "which he hopes to recover", as benefice, which was voted for.⁴³ So, in this transitional period, some of the land that had already been divided up had not yet been taken over by the new owners, and the congregation tried to keep it as cultivated agricultural land.

In February 1947, the congregation again applied for the exemption of the endowment lands from nationalization, for which a statement was made of the current situation of the lands, according to which the foundation originally owned 242 acres, of which only 43 acres remained, as the rest had been distributed. The church had 158 acres, of which an area of 61 acres and one of 17 acres were left, and the larger one was included in the 100 acres left by decree. In addition to these, congregation, averaging

⁴² KREL III/I., box 33, 189/1951. Letter by Rev. Endre Tóth to the Ministry of Finance, dated 10 October 1951.

⁴³ KREL, Minutes of the Session of the Kecskemét Reformed Congregation II/3, 1946–1999. Report of the Finance and Agriculture Committee on the situation of church lands, 12 April 1946.

30 acres, which had been established around farm churches in the extensive outlying areas, were left to the church. In the petition, the congregation sought to have the remaining 100 acres of church land permanently assigned and the endowment lands be kept.⁴⁴

Bálint Kovács, a pastor in Kecskemét, mentions in his memoirs the uncertainties among pastors and cantors due to the land reform, whose income was mainly secured by the income from the glebe:

It's true that the law ordered the churches to be given 100 acres, but who took that into account amidst the revolutionary spirit?! There were parts where the provision was observed, and there were some others where it was not. So, indeed, there was confusion about the future. But there were exceptions, like Talfája, where the college foundation land was not disturbed for a while, not even the gardens of the Bodor Zsuzsánna Home. All these institutions, schools, and boarding schools received the materials they needed to feed their residents. However, several endowment landholdings were seized and distributed without regard to everyone and everything. [...] Knowing all this, the farm pastors shared their concerns about both religious education and land with each other and their fellow pastors in the circle of pastors in Kecskemét in the still existing Church District of Kecskemét. [...] The monthly pastoral society meetings were also attended by the religion teachers of Kecskemét. After devotions and prayers, the meetings discussed the regulations and events in the public church and then the situation in Kecskemét and its surroundings with the changes in the town and the farms. [...] At the same time as religious education, the land issue was never left untouched. There were times when land was seized, and other times when it was left. All this caused increasing uncertainty for pastors serving on the farm, especially where there were children in the family.⁴⁵

In parallel with the confiscation of the church's land, the congregation felt that it would be worthwhile to make the farms belonging to the urban congregation independent because after the implementation of the Decree it seemed they would be able to retain more land and, as an independent congregation, the pastors there would be entitled to

⁴⁴ SZABADOS 2000, 49.

⁴⁵ KOVÁCS 2006, 77.

a congrua. To this end, Bálint Kovács visited two staff members of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, who visited the farm churches and found that they could only provide state aid if they became independent. The independence of the farm congregations had already begun, first in January 1947, when Rev. Kálmán Csikai of Méntelek submitted his proposal to the session, and then the farm congregations started to work towards independence. The session accepted the payslip of the farm pastors, and then the congrua committee met in Kecskemét between 9 and 11 May 1947 with representatives of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the congregation. At the meeting, the congrua of the pastors of the five new congregations was determined, the positions of the pastors of the Kecskemét Reformed Church County were discussed with the county board, and, finally, the agreement was recorded in minutes as follows:⁴⁶

Before the land reform, Kecskemét was able to cover all its expenses from its own resources and did not need any state aid. However, the land reform, nationalization, and the devastations of war radically changed the financial situation of the congregation. The congregation maintained several institutions: schools, a nursing home, a dormitory, a law academy, boarding schools, all of which had suffered, one might say, 100% damage to their interior design. The congregation must concentrate all its efforts on the restoration of these buildings and institutions, and therefore cannot give the farmstead pastors an allowance that would ensure them minimum living conditions. For the two central pastoral positions, it is not asking for any State aid, but for the five farmstead pastoral positions, it is asking for the Treasury to take over the remuneration of these posts in full.⁴⁷

Thereafter, the first independent pastor, Balázs K. Nagy, was ordained in Helvécia on 26 September 1948, then in the Kecskemét Reformed Church County the service of Dean József Jóba expired, and Zsigmond Büky, the pastor of Cegléd, was elected in his place, so the next pastor, Sándor Sima, was ordained only on 12 February 1952 in Szentkirály, and on the same day Pál Lengyel was ordained in Lakitelek. In parallel with this process, these settlements were administratively separated from the expanded boundaries of Kecskemét.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Op. cit. 76–84.

⁴⁷ Op. cit. 80.

⁴⁸ Op. cit. 82–84.

Nationalization of the Church Land in Szeremle

Szeremle is situated in Bács-Kiskun County, southwest, a few kilometres away from Baja, near the Danube. The Reformed congregation had 96 acres of land, half of which belonged to the pastor and the other half equally to the two teachers. According to the 1945 decree, since the landholding here did not reach the 100 acres specified in the decree, it should have been exempt from nationalization. However, the local land-claiming committee decided that since there was not enough land to allocate to the land claimants, the Reformed Church's land would be parcelled out, and it would be provided with land elsewhere. The National Land Settlement Council instructed the local committee to come to an agreement with the church on this matter. The chairman of the local committee and the session held negotiations in November 1945 and agreed to retain 15 acres of glebe, 10 acres for the teacher and 5 acres for the bell-ringer from the 96 acres, to allocate the remaining 57 acres – which the new owners could take possession of on 15 October 1946 – and to provide replacement land in the outskirts of Baja. The deal froze because of the one-year deadline for taking possession, but eventually a similar arrangement was reached through the intervention of the National Council. During the nationalization of the church schools in 1948, the state also took possession of the 18 acres of teachers' land, so the teachers who had been working in the church schools also lost their benefices and were left with only the state salary.⁴⁹

A New Wave of Nationalization of Church Land

The state imposed increasingly onerous levies and payments on the remaining church land. In 1947, the state imposed a property tax on churches, which meant a new challenge to congregations. Rev. Endre Tóth of Kecskemét summarized the facts of the local property tax issue to Bishop Albert Bereczky.⁵⁰ In 1947, the local congregation was

⁴⁹ BÍRÓ, Éva (2023): Az egyházi földek elvesztése az 1945-ös földreform és a földfelajánlások következtében a Szeremlei Református Egyházközségben. In: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor (eds.): *Hagyomány, Identitás, Történelem 2022*. Budapest, KRE HTK. 573–582.

⁵⁰ On the church leadership's conformity with the state, see in this issue: KISS, Réka (2024): *Pathfinding and Connections in the Life of Small Reformed Communities in Budapest*. The

estimated a property tax of HUF 239,043, which was to be paid over three years, amounting to nearly HUF 80,000 a year. On 29 September 1947, the congregation, together with the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Israelites of Kecskemét, submitted a petition to the Minister of Finance, asking for a reduction or cancellation of part of the property tax imposed. It was proven that they could not pay the said amount because the rent of the properties was frozen at the 1939 levels and a public tax of 115% was imposed. The property tax would be 50-60% of the rent, so the public tax would increase to 170%, more than one and a half times the tax on the rent received. Meanwhile, much money was spent on buildings damaged during the war and on rebuilding schools, which is why the churches were asked to be exempted from the property tax.⁵¹ They received a refusal order from the Minister of Finance in September 1948, but later they did not pay either, as they would not have had any money left to pay the 12 employees. They asked the bishop to try to intervene in their case through the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH).⁵²

The church leaders encouraged the congregations to offer their remaining land to the state on a voluntary basis after the nationalization wave of 1945, and on 14 September 1949 they concluded an agreement with the Hungarian state to this effect. The Covenant and Synod Presidency stressed that the draft agreement provided for the possibility of “continuous donation until 31 December 1952”, after which it would expire. The draft

Contexts of the 1967 YMCA Trial. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*. 69, Supplement I. 157-190; LÁNYI, Gábor (2024): Viable Cooperation or Unscrupulous Service? Motivations for Albert Bereczky’s Activity in Church Governance. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*. 69, Supplement I. 101-119; SZETEY, Szabolcs (2024): “We Must Participate with the Fruits of Our Faith in Building Socialism”. The Preaching Committee in the Danubian Reformed Church District in the Mid-20th Century. In: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Reformata Transylvanica*. 69, Supplement I. 120-136; LÁNYI, Gábor (2019): Bishop Albert Bereczky (1893–1966). A Life Full of Questions. In: Kovács, Ábrahám – Shin, Jaeshik (eds.): *Nationalism, Communism and Christian Identity: Protestant Theological Reflections from Korea and Hungary*. Debrecen – Gwangju, Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem – Honam Theological University and Seminary. 123–140.

⁵¹ SZABADOS 2000, 50–51.

⁵² KREL III/I., box. 33, 1950–1951, 203/1951. Letter from Rev. Endre Tóth to Bishop Albert Bereczky.

agreement included the Presidency of the Universal Covenant as the seller, as well as the representative of congregations, church districts, church counties and the foundations, associations, and institutions administered by them. The purchase price for the properties offered in 1949 was HUF 70 per registered gold crown of income,⁵³ HUF 65 in 1950, and in 1951–52 only HUF 60; if the property also had a farm building, an additional 5 forints per registered gold crown of income was paid. The purchase price was to be paid by the State to the Covenant Presidency in instalments over a period of twenty years, without interest. The State acquired ownership of the estate on the date of acceptance, and the Church received the benefits of the property and paid the public encumbrances for the year of sale. The draft agreement was followed by an informative text stating that it did not affect the freehold rights of the landowners, but that if they “wish to offer their property, the property will be taken over subject to the above conditions”.⁵⁴ The terms of the agreement were very unfavourable to the congregations – the longer they waited, the less they received. The price was paid in instalments over twenty years; they received no interest, and finally they did not even receive the whole sum. However, the extremely high tax burden and the obligation to hand over the land meant that it was not a rational decision to keep it.

The circular letter of the Universal Covenant of 30 July 1951 accelerated and made compulsory the transfer of church estate, as the Presidency “calls upon all congregations, church districts, and church counties of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the institutes and institutions maintained by them, as well as their responsible leaders and bodies, to offer – in their own interest – all church land in accordance with the agreement between the Hungarian state and the Reformed Church on the subject of church land, without delay, but no later than 1 September 1951 so that the state may take possession of them immediately after the harvest”. Church-owned cottages and their associated land of up to 800 fathoms did not have to be transferred. For larger areas, a decision to transfer had to be taken “without delay”, at which point it was no

⁵³ The value of a juger of arable land in Hungary, which was introduced in 1875, is an indicator of the net income of a juger of arable land, i.e. its fertility, location, and cultivability.

⁵⁴ Decision of the Covenant and Synodal Presidency Council on church property. Budapest, 14 September 1949. Published in: *Református Egyház.* 1(1949), 15. 14–15. Published by: BÍRÓ 2023, 579–581.

longer a voluntary offer but rather that those who would not vote for a “forced sale” were threatened with being fined. The elders were also threatened that if they were reluctant to vote in favour of the transfer of church land to the state, “all legal consequences arising from this fact shall be borne jointly and severally by the elders”. The session were therefore to vote nominally. The donation of land had to be made at the local council, and a report on the decision had to be sent to the session and to the presidency of the Covenant.⁵⁵

On 15 August 1951, an addendum to the Covenant circular was received, according to which “800 fathoms of land per person may be retained for each church employee. A church payee was a professional church employee whose role was mainly clerical.” In addition to the minister, the cantor and the bell-ringer could be such beneficiaries if they received a congrua for their employment. Such land was in particular the garden belonging to the parsonage. “Where there is such a garden and its area exceeds 400 fathoms, the payee cannot claim a special area supplement. However, if this garden exceeds the retained 800 by 1 to 200 fathoms, the surplus needs not be offered and split off, but may be retained by the employee. If the church’s garden is less than 400 fathoms, he may apply for an addition up to 800 fathoms from either the built-in area or the periphery.” The 800 fathoms that could be kept could be of any type of cultivation, and no multiplier was required for vineyards and orchards. At the same time as the land was offered, the living and dead stock had to be offered, for which the state provided for payment of compensation. Cemetery land was not to be transferred to the state.⁵⁶

At the meeting of the elders of the Kecskemét congregation held on 19 August 1951, Chief Elder Dr József Szabó presented the Covenant’s circular and the proposal of the meeting of the united financial, legal, and agricultural committee held on 12 August 1951, as well as the additional circular letter of the Covenant. The chief elder announced that the session had already offered part of the church lands to the state on 4 April 1951, at which time the last remaining lands were negotiated. The session decided by roll-call vote to offer – in addition to the properties already offered to the state for purchase –

⁵⁵ Circular letter of the Presidency of the Ref. Universal Covenant on the donation of church land, KREL III/I. 1950–1951. Box 33, 140.

⁵⁶ Amendment to the circular letter of the Presidency of the Ref. Universal Covenant on the donation of church land. KREL III/I., box 33, 1950–1951, 149.

the agricultural properties still owned by the church to the state, a total of 127 acres in eight parcels, together with the buildings on them, and requested the transfer or cancellation of the debts on the properties. It was also stipulated that after the land had been offered, the congregation would keep 2 acres of vineyards with a house and a yard in the Csáktornya dűlő in the outskirts of Kecskemét as benefice for the five beneficiaries. In Lakitelek, the land kept for the vicarage and the congregation house and in Szentkirály, Helvécia, Méntelek, and Ágasegyháza the church and congregation gardens were retained. The decision on the donation was sent to the competent authorities.⁵⁷

On 2 November 1951, Endre Tóth wrote to Dean István Gaál⁵⁸ because the congregation had been imposed such a significant obligation to pay the in-kind contributions on the land already donated to the state that it could not fulfil it. That is why he tried to find out what could be done in this situation. The production of bread, fodder, and maize did not reach the amount required to be delivered, so the pastor suggested that the value of the levy should be transferred to the “purchase price” of the land. The dean replied that he should contact Roland Kiss in person,⁵⁹ who might be able to help him in this hopeless situation through his connections at the ministry.⁶⁰

The former owners, i.e. the congregations, were not allowed to decide how to use the instalments of the purchase price for the land, being bound to ask the Covenant for permission to spend the money, and the application had to specify what they wanted to use it for. It was the practice that, with the permission of the Covenant, these sums could only

⁵⁷ KREL III/I., box 33, 1950–1951. 154. Decision of the Session of the Kecskemét Reformed Congregation on the donation of church landholdings to the state.

⁵⁸ Rev. István Gaál (1891–1970), pastor in Törökszentmiklós (1922–1958), Dean of Nagykunság (1937–1958), temporarily managed the Transbiscan Reformed Church District in 1956. SZABADI, István (2012): Névtár. In: Szabadi, István (ed.): „Szorultságomban tág tért adtál”, Balla Árpád református lelképásztor hagyatéka. Debrecen, Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerületi és Kollégiumi Levéltár. 523.

⁵⁹ Roland Kiss (1888–1967) was the Chief Elder of the Danubian Reformed Church District between 1949 and 1958, lay President of the Universal Covenant. From 1945, he was Member of Parliament, then state secretary at the Ministry of the Interior and then Minister of Defence. SZABADI 2012, 525.

⁶⁰ KREL III/I., 1950-1951., box 33, 217. Rev. Endre Tóth’s letter to Dean István Gaál.

be used for property renovation, building renovation, and construction.⁶¹ For the allocation of building materials, the churches had to obtain the consent of the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH).⁶²

Summary

Until the end of World War II, Reformed pastors, cantors, teachers, and bell-ringers made a decent living largely thanks to the land owned by the congregation and its institutions as well as civil organizations. In addition, the *deputatum*, i.e. the benefice from the crops (cereals, firewood, wine, salt, honey, meat, eggs, etc.), which was fixed in the pastors' payslip, ensured their livelihood, which the congregants produced on their own farms and which was increasingly paid for in cash in the 20th century. At the same time, it should be noted that individual congregations had very different amounts of land, those with a strong Reformed tradition and peasant background having up to several thousand acres and significant educational institutions – such as Kecskemét, Kiskunhalas, or Nagykőrös –, while the congregation of Szolnok, for example, with a Catholic majority, had no land at all, and the priest's income was already partly provided by the state.

The nationalization of church land and the increasing tax burden and in-kind contributions imposed on farming congregants have endangered the livelihood of pastors and their families. In 1952, a comprehensive study was made of the financial situation of the pastors in the Bács-Kiskunság Reformed Church County, clearly showing the great financial deterioration and vulnerability. The *deputatum* of the village pastors amounted to a few thousand forints a year, but several of them reported that they had not even received the previous year's salary, as the congregants had had no money to give. After 1945, the most secure monthly income for pastors was the congrua provided by the state, which amounted to HUF 600, or HUF 800 including family allowance. Usually, the repayment of the peace loan was deducted from this amount before the payment, reducing the low amount by HUF 50-100. In this difficult economic situation, the pastors were in debt; they could not meet their obligations to pay their contributions, and, according

⁶¹ BÍRÓ 2023, 586.

⁶² LANTOS, Edit (2009): 1958 és a templomépítés divatja. In: Ö. Kovács, József – Kunt, Gergely (eds.): *A politikai diktatúra társadalmiasítása*. Miskolc, ME BTK. 32.

to the data sheets, almost all pastors had loans, many of them also tax arrears, which increased further in 1952.⁶³ Pastors often took care of their elderly family members and also wanted to have their children schooled. Kálmán Nagy, pastor of Érsekcsanád, noted that he had sent 640 of his monthly income of 701 forints to his children studying at the high school in Budapest, so the three of them had left 61 forints to live on.⁶⁴ Pastors' wives, who often had teaching qualifications, were usually not given jobs appropriate to their qualifications. It can be concluded that the nationalization of the Reformed Church's lands curtailed the financial independence of the pastors and left them in a vulnerable position, increasingly dependent on the state for their income, resulting in a rough cooperation with the state.

In the 1945 land redistribution, the original legal settlement would have left a relatively significant amount of land in the possession of congregations (hundreds of acres) and would have provided land for the maintenance of public institutions, but with the advance of the communists, the pressure on the churches increased, and with the progress of forced collectivization and the replacement of the church leadership, by the early 1950s the Reformed congregations had lost the land they had been given. In the process of land distribution, it can be seen as a valid argument that congregations with larger landholdings were supposed to contribute more to the landless farm workers' access to land, something to which the church leadership itself was open. Taking into account the educational, cultural, and social commitments of the individual congregations, a fairer arrangement could have been established whereby landless congregations could have been given estates as benefices. In 1945, there was an attempt to do so, but local conditions in many places overrode this even then, and with the advance of the communists, the confiscation of all land and church institutions became increasingly dominant. All in all, we must agree with Gergely Krisztián Horváth's statement regarding the Reformed Church that "The 1945 land distribution was a well-designed, well-organized, masterfully timed

⁶³ In 1952, the average monthly wage in the public sector in Hungary was HUF 928. BALÓ, György – LIPOVECZ, Iván (1987): *Tények Könyve 1988*. Budapest, Móra Könyvkiadó. <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/TenyekKonyve-tenyek-konyve-1/1988-2/magyarorszag-3C8C/gazdasag-3CD7/> (accessed in: April 2024).

⁶⁴ SZABÓ, Bence: *Lelkészsorsok a hatalom hálójában. A hitélet visszaszorításának egzisztenciális eszközei*. (manuscript).

campaign of the Communist Party, disguised as a democratic movement, to eliminate the economic foundations of rival political forces and world views.”⁶⁵ We might add that the story did not stop there, it continued into the early 1950s.

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⁶⁵ HORVÁTH 2018, 85.

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