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## The Significance of Relations between Hungarian and Dutch Reformed Congregations under the Single-Party State – With a Special Emphasis on the Dutch Connections of Dezső Szabó, Pastor in Káloz, in the Focus of the State Security Services<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract.*

The study provides a glimpse into the ministry of Dezső Szabó, the Reformed pastor in Káloz (Hungary) in the 1960s, when he rebuilt informal church relations

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– independent of church leadership – with Dutch congregations. Prior to the war, Dezső Szabó studied in the Netherlands on a scholarship. The party-state authorities, however, did not approve of inter-church relations with Western churches, but in the changed environment of church politics and church law brought on by the 1960s, Dezső Szabó seized the opportunity to rekindle old ties through his former theological acquaintances. Dezső Szabó's activity was monitored by state security, and the records also provide information on the situation of the Dutch Reformed Church. The study draws attention to dilemmas of wayfinding and identity, full of challenges, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** neo-Calvinism, identity, surveillance, single-party state, Káloz

## Introduction

A few years ago, the Dutch historian Maarten J. Aalders's research into the life of Jenő Sebestyén and the Dutch–Hungarian Reformed relations in the interwar period, especially that of the Hungarian theology scholarship holders, made me contemplate the cross-section of Hungarian–Dutch relations that we can find in the years immediately following World War II (e.g. children's trains) and then in the period of the single-party state.

I was particularly interested in the post-World War II careers of former scholarship holders. On the one hand, I wanted to find out what they were able to retain from their Dutch influences and contacts as Reformed congregational pastors in socialist Hungary and whether they were subject to special surveillance by the State Security Services.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, I was also interested in how the theologians and pastors emigrated (one has to differentiate – depending on their individual circumstances, of course – to what extent it was a choice or a necessity, what motivation or life situation was behind it), what kind of service they provided in the Netherlands, how much contact they maintained with Hungarian pastors and congregations, and whether they were also in the sights of the political police. I think that in both approaches we are

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.abtl.hu/english/>.

dealing with an under-explored area. Both dimensions can be found in national state and church archives, congregational archives, and private family archives. This paper focuses on the former approach and within that on a small slice of how the life and ministry of the pre-World War II scholarship theologians panned out, who – due to their age – were in a position to spend active years/decades in socialist Hungary.

The context of the present research project, namely *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Reformed Identity, Challenges, Wayfinding*, the life journeys I have researched and published so far (Lajos Jakos, István Tüski, József Végh<sup>4</sup>), the Dutch–Hungarian Reformed relations during the single-party state, and the differences in the church constitution are all approached from yet another perspective, described above.<sup>5</sup>

In the following, I will try to illustrate through a personal example the particular challenges faced by Reformed pastors, families, and communities, which show a slice of identity and the search for a way forward.

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<sup>4</sup> József Végh's son, Johan Alexander Sándor Végh (Hans Végh), wrote a volume of family history in Dutch. See: VÉGH, Hans (2023): *Van Origine Hongars. Een Famíliekroniek*. Boekscout.

<sup>5</sup> My publications on this topic so far include:

KÖBEL, Szilvia (2020): „A múltban ezer év alatt nem hazudtak annyit, mint most 5 perc alatt”: Magyar református lelkészek hollandiai emigrációjában az államszocializmus évtizedeiben. I. rész. In: *Betekintő*. 14, 4. 69–98. [https://betekinto.hu/hu/szamok/2020\\_4](https://betekinto.hu/hu/szamok/2020_4) (accessed on: 13.11.2023). Köbel, Szilvia (2021a): „A múltban ezer év alatt nem hazudtak annyit, mint most 5 perc alatt”: Magyar református lelkészek hollandiai emigrációjában az államszocializmus évtizedeiben. II. rész. In: *Betekintő*. 15, 1. 55–93. DOI: 10.25834/BET.2021.1.2.

[https://betekinto.hu/hu/szamok/2021\\_1](https://betekinto.hu/hu/szamok/2021_1) (accessed on: 13.11.2023).

KÖBEL, Szilvia (2021b): „Rajtuk keresztül oszlatni lehetne az antikommunista propaganda hatását...”: Tüski István és Végh József református lelkészek hollandiai emigrációjában a magyar állambiztonsági szervek látókörében. In: Palasik, Mária – Pócs, Nándor (eds.): *Titkos hidak – Az állambiztonság és az emigráció kapcsolatai 1945–1989*. Budapest – Pécs: Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (ÁBTL) – Kronosz Kiadó. 179–207.

Köbel, Szilvia (2021c): „Külföldi tanulmányútjainak folytatása nagyfontosságú közérdek”: Végh József református lelkész hollandiai emigrációjában a magyar politikai rendőrség látókörében. In: Kiss, Réka – Lányi, Gábor (eds.): *Hagyomány, identitás, történelem 2020*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kar Egyháztörténeti Kutatóintézet – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Egyház és Társadalom Kutatóintézetének Reformáció Öröksége Műhelye. 289–303.

The ministry of Reformed Pastor Dezső Szabó deserves attention from several points of view. I would like to highlight three of them, which are related to the research I undertook in this project:

1. Before World War II, Dezső Szabó was a theology student on a scholarship in the Netherlands. The question arises as to how his identity was influenced by the interwar period and his Dutch connections.

2. To what extent did the ecclesiastical political and legal environment of the 1960s affect the relations of Reformed congregations abroad?

3. How can we document the revival/revitalization of Dutch–Hungarian church relations in the 1960s, especially under the surveillance of the socialist state security services (political police)?

## **1. During the Interwar Period, Dezső Szabó Was a Scholarship Holder in the Netherlands**

The above-mentioned Dutch author's volume on the Dutch–Hungarian Protestant relations between the two world wars<sup>6</sup> was published first in Dutch and then in Hungarian in 2023 by Kálvin Publishing House.<sup>7</sup> Maarten J. Aalders explained at the book launch that he had presented the Dutch perspective. In this volume – in an appendix –, the author publishes the names of the Reformed theology students who studied in the Netherlands on scholarship in the interwar period,<sup>8</sup> which had also been partially published by János M. Hermán earlier.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> AALDERS, Maarten J. (2021): *Nederlandse en Hongaarse protestanten gedurende het interbellum*. Vuurbaak, Amersfoort.

<sup>7</sup> AALDERS, Maarten J. (2023): *Holland–magyar protestáns kapcsolatok a két világháború között*. Kálvin Kiadó.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. 396–400.

<sup>9</sup> HERMÁN, M. János (2018): *Erőtlenység által (2Kor 12,9a). Hitvallók és mártírok. Száműzöttek, menekültek, befogadók, maradók* (Dokumentumok és dolgozatok a XX. századi magyar reformátusok egyházi életéből). The publication of the book was supported by the István Juhász Foundation

Let us look back at the interwar period for a few brief moments:

During World War I, the daughters of the neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper came to Hungary and helped the Dutch Mission, which is how they came into contact with the Reformed pastor and theology teacher Jenő Sebestyén. Sebestyén visited the Netherlands several times, gave lectures, and the idea of neo-Calvinism reached Hungary through him.<sup>10</sup> Sebestyén's influence also led to greater interest towards Hungary in the Netherlands. Jenő Sebestyén worked to help Hungarian theology students to study in the Netherlands, by offering them the opportunity to study at the Free University of Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit) and the Theological School at Kampen, which were connected to Kuyper and the strict Dutch Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland). Given the economic situation, this was not affordable for Hungarian students, so Sebestyén strived to create a "gereformeerde study fund". It should be mentioned that Stipendium Bernardinum to the University of Utrecht, which had existed since 1761, allowed a limited number of Hungarian students to study in the Netherlands, but Sebestyén did not consider the education in Utrecht to be theologically acceptable, in line with Kuyper's views. The "gereformeerde fund" was established and operated in parallel with the Stipendium Bernardinum fund. The first student was Sándor Csekey followed by Gyula Antal.<sup>11</sup> The Hungarian students in the Netherlands were encouraged to reform the church.<sup>12</sup> The aim

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in the Netherlands and the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék. Oradea/Nagyvárad. <https://hermanmjanos.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/erocc8btensecc81g-acc81tal-pdf-hj-2018-a4indb.pdf> (accessed on: 13.11.2023).

<sup>10</sup> LÁNYI, Gábor (2021): Sebestyén Jenő (1884–1950) és a történelmi kálvinizmus. In: Petrás, Éva (ed.): *A 20. századi magyar protestáns közéletiség arcképcsarnoka*. Budapest, Barankovics István Alapítvány – Gondolat. 17. See also: LÁNYI, Gábor (2018): Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) és a neokálvinizmus. In: Literáty, Zoltán (ed.): *Quoniam tecum est fons vitae in lumine tuo videbimus lumen. Teológiai témák a 65 éves Kocsev Miklós tiszteletére*. Budapest, L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem. 217–230.

<sup>11</sup> AALDERs 2023, 396–400, 251–256.

<sup>12</sup> Here I would like to draw the attention to the fact that the Reformed Pastor Lajos Jakos, who also studied in the Netherlands, published his monograph on the Gereformeerde Kerk in 1942. This work was Lajos Jakos's doctoral thesis, which he defended in Debrecen. Lajos Jakos's

was to be able to host six Hungarian students a year. The first report on Hungarian students was drafted in 1927.<sup>13</sup>

This is how Dezső Szabó got to the Netherlands. Dezső Szabó was born in 1905 and died in 1978. During his years as a theologian, he studied in Kampen in 1926/27 and 1927/28 (junior and senior years), simultaneously studying in Germany while obtaining a degree in theology in Pápa and also studying philosophy (axiology) at the University of Budapest. Dezső Szabó served in Káloz starting from 22 December 1935.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Church Policy and Legal Environment of the 1960s

In the autumn of 1967, at the third session of the 7<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) held in Budapest, started on 1 April 1964, six draft laws were presented, marking the completion of the ecclesiastical legislative procedures that had begun in 1959. At that time, the synod was deliberating in the spirit of the Reformation, and at the same time its main task was the “exercise of *jus reformandi*”. In his opening speech, Bishop Tibor Bartha summarized the draft laws by saying that up until that point in the history of the Church “no other legislation has considered the perspectives of the serving Church of the serving Christ to that degree”. According to the President, the draft clearly “progresses” the Church “from the status of a dominant national church to the status of a serving church”.<sup>15</sup>

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book gives a detailed account of the history and structure of the Kerk. See JAKOS, Lajos (1942): *A holland szigorú református egyház gyülekezeti élete és missziói munkája*. Budapest.

<sup>13</sup> AALDERS 2023, 396–400, 324–326.

<sup>14</sup> KRÁNITZ, Zsolt (ed.) (2013): „A késő idők emlékezetében éljenek...” A Dunántúli Református Egyházkerület lelkészi önéletrajzai, 1943 – *A Pápai Református Gyűjtemények Kiadványai, Forrásközlések 13. Jubileumi kötetek 2.* (Pápa). Mezőföldi Egyházmegye. A Pápai Református Gyűjtemények Kiadványai, Forrásközlések 1–13.

[https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/PRGYK\\_Fk\\_13\\_Jub\\_02/?query=k%C3%A1l%C3%B3z%20szab%C3%B3%20dezs%C5%91&pg=399&layout=s](https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/view/PRGYK_Fk_13_Jub_02/?query=k%C3%A1l%C3%B3z%20szab%C3%B3%20dezs%C5%91&pg=399&layout=s) (accessed on: 08.02.2024).

<sup>15</sup> KÖBEL, Szilvia (2019): A „szolgáló egyház” törvénykönyve. Az államszocializmus hatása a református egyházalkotmányra és a református egyházi törvényekre. In: *Glossa Iuridica*. 3–4. 165–185.

The date of a major change in the internal rules of the RCH in the 1960s is linked to several anniversaries. On the one hand, in the introduction to the Reformed Church Code, we read that it was adopted in 1967, on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first constituting synod in Debrecen, by the 7<sup>th</sup> Synod held in Budapest, and the same year marked the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. On the other hand, 1968 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agreement between the Hungarian state and the RCH, and the year in which the state subsidies to the church under the original agreement were due to expire. On the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the constituting Synod held in Debrecen, in the summer of 1967, in a sermon titled *Örökségünk és feladatunk: a reformáció* [Our Heritage and Task: The Reformation], the Synod recalled the dilemmas of the post-World War II search for a path forward, which preceded the signing of the 1948 Convention. Firstly, they recalled that the Church offered its “willingness to serve the new Hungarian state and society by its own means” and secondly – and this is the less frequently quoted idiom – that the Church rejected the “temptation, to become an illegal political party”, and distanced itself “from the real danger that political attempts might infiltrate the Church under the guise of a Samaritan service – itself an inevitability of great societal change.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite the basic creed of the Calvinist branch of the Reformation being the same in Reformed (Presbyterian) churches worldwide, there are some more or less significant differences in church order, internal legal order, and relationship to the state. Hungary is unique in terms of the episcopal system because in other countries the presbyteral polity – notably without bishops – is predominant. In addition to the common Calvinist foundations, certain ecclesiological structures and theological trends developed differently in the two countries, and these differences became more pronounced (particular) during the decades of the Cold War. In this respect, the relations of the Reformed Church(es) in the Netherlands with Hungary and the relations of Hungarian Reformed pastors with the Netherlands were closely monitored by the state security, which was not by chance since the Dutch Reformed influence – advocating for and practising greater congregational autonomy in contrast to the Hungarian Reformed Church based on the episcopal system – was not welcome in the eyes of the single-party state. Furthermore, the Dutch also monitored human rights in Hungary during the decades of the Cold War, which exposed the propaganda of the single-party state to the West.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> KÖBEL 2020, 69–98.

It was also relevant for state security that there was a difference between the Hungarian and the Dutch Reformed Church not only in the issue of the episcopal system and congregational autonomy but also that of the organizational-constitutional unity of the church and its uniform ecclesiastical status. Operating within the framework of several separate organizations, the Dutch Reformed churches also had different interpretations of their relationship to the state. The Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (known as the strict Dutch Reformed Church), representing the neo-Calvinist movement associated with Kuyper, professed complete independence from the state and was therefore considered more dangerous by the political police.<sup>18</sup>

In 1966, the State Office for Church Affairs (hereinafter: ÁEH) prepared a note for the Ministry of the Interior on Dutch–Hungarian Reformed relations because the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Helvetic Confession was due in 1967. This memo is an important source for us because it contains a summary written from the perspective of the ÁEH, according to which “Dutch–Hungarian church relations from 1945 to 1956 were mostly maintained by Laszlo Pap.”<sup>19</sup>

From the 1960s, however, the “dangerous character” of Dutch–Hungarian Reformed relations gradually diminished in the eyes of state security. The reason for this was, on the one hand, that the old scholarship holders were slowly “aging out” and, on the other hand, the two Reformed churches in the Netherlands were also getting closer. In his monograph on the gereformeerde church, Maarten J. Aalders describes how the “modern theology” emerged in the gereformeerde church in the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> In the autumn of 1966 (13–21 November) a five-member delegation of the RCH paid an official visit to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> MNL OL XIX-A-21-d-0029-5/c/1966. Memo of the State Office for Church Affairs on Dutch–Hungarian Reformed relations for the Ministry of the Interior on the preparations for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformed jubilee celebration of the Second Helvetic Confession in 1967. 22 September 1966. Qtd in KÖBEL 2020, 69–98.

<sup>20</sup> AALDERS, Maarten J. (2015): *Gereformeerden onder elkaar. Elf opstellen en een preek*. Uitgeverij De Vuurbaak bv, Barneveld. 273. The author writes about the process in the last chapter of the volume: *Gereformeerden, waarheen?* [The Reformed, Whereto?] (239–246). Qted in KÖBEL 2020, 69–98.

the Netherlands. The informant “Lajos Tolnai”, a Reformed pastor, Head of the Foreign Affairs Department and later bishop of the Reformed Church, prepared a detailed report on the visit for the State Security Services. The report states that the invitation was sent by the synod of the Hervormde Kerk,<sup>21</sup> but “it was later joined by the presidency of the synod of the so-called strict Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland)”.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The Revival/Revitalization of Dutch-Hungarian Congregational Relations in the 1960s – Especially under the Surveillance of the State Security Services

Dezső Szabó (“Uncle Dezső”) served in Káloz from 22 December 1935 and was the pastor of the Káloz congregation for 39 years – until 1974. According to the website of the Káloz Reformed Congregation, on the afternoon of 26 June 2005, Szabó was remembered in a thanksgiving service on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. Dezső Szabó built up the “unofficial” contacts of the RCH with the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards), and there is a memorial plaque in the congregation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk / Dutch Reformed Church, the oldest Reformed church in the Netherlands, including the majority of the Dutch, formerly the state church. Both hervormd and gereformerd mean ‘Reformed’. See KOCSEV, Miklós (2002): *Impulzusok a holland református (Gereformeerde/Hervormde) gyakorlati teológiából az ezredforduló körül. (Különös tekintettel hazai református egyházi életünkre)*. Doctoral thesis. <https://dea.lib.unideb.hu/dea/bitstream/handle/2437/127724/Dolgozat-Kocsev.pdf> (accessed on: 09.02.2024); RASKER, Albert J. (1986): *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795*. Haar geschiedenis en theologie in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Kampen.

<sup>22</sup> ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-29600/5. Digital page 56. Working file of the informant codenamed “Lajos Tolnai”, vol. 5. The informant’s report dated 25 November 1966. Qtd. in KÖBEL 2020, 69–98. Box 6 fund in the Historical Archives of the State Security Services (ÁBTL) reads that the real name of the informant codenamed “Lajos Tolnai (Aldebröi)” was Károly Tóth (1931–2014). See ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network records.

<sup>23</sup> <https://honlap.parokia.hu/lap/kalozi-reformatus-egyhazkozseg/cikk/mutat/emlektabl-szabo-dezso-lelkipasztorrol/> (accessed on: 22.05.2023).

Let us see what we can learn from the state security's documents about how Szabó built up his "unofficial" contacts with the Netherlands, even before the official church contacts described in the previous point had taken place:

We can find related documents in the reports of an informant with the alias János Varga. The informant was a Reformed pastor, Dean of the Church County of Mezőföldre.<sup>24</sup> (I would like to mention here that the informant also reported about Gyula Antal, a Reformed pastor, who was also a scholarship holder in the Netherlands before World War II.)<sup>25</sup> One of the documents that stands out is the report of Dezső Szabó's visit to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1964. According to the memo, the informant shorthand-recorded the "account" given by Szabó to the pastors of the church county. The liaison officer instructed the informant to "prepare a report of Dezső Szabó's text" for the "next time".<sup>26</sup> Below I would like to present an excerpt from this document as a source.

Dezső Szabó's account about his trip to the Netherlands (given by the informant "János Varga" on 23 October 1964, at 18:00):

Departure: I have often thought over the past year how nice it would be if I could go to the Netherlands one more time. At those times, it was unimaginable. I could only pray that God would help me in some way. The help came in very small ways. In December 1961, I received a Dutch youth magazine,<sup>27</sup> and I read in it the account of a booklet written by Dr Impeta,<sup>28</sup> and it contained the map of the ecclesiastic Netherlands. I knew this

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<sup>24</sup> Among the network records (so-called series of cards marked with number 6) in the Historical Archives of the State Security Services (ÁBTL) reads that the real name of informant "János Varga" was Sándor Szabó. See ÁBTL 2.2.2. Network records.

<sup>25</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092. pl. 10, digital page numbers: 16–22.

<sup>26</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092, digital page number 59. Report of the informant codenamed "János Varga" dated 21 September 1964.

<sup>27</sup> I think it was brave of Dezső Szabó to write this down in 1964, as working with the youth was still very risky at that time.

<sup>28</sup> *Dunántúli Protestáns Lap* wrote about the Dr Impeta mentioned in the archival material in the Miscellanea column in 1928, from which we learn that Károly Dobos also knew Impeta as the friend of the Hungarians: "The secretary of the Reformed branch of the KIE (the Hungarian version of the YMCA), Károly Dobos, visited the Netherlands from 17 December to 23 January, where he studied the organization and life of the youth associations [Jongelings (Meisjes) Vereniging op Gereformeerde Grondslag] of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Dr Impeta well because he was a pastor in Kampen where I studied. I wrote him a letter. It was not easy because I had been in the Netherlands 34 years ago, and I had not written a letter in Dutch since then; I could read, but I did not write. I was sweating over it for a week, and I kept re-reading what I had written and finally sent it. I wrote to tell him that I had read about his published book, and I would very much like to receive it, if he could send it to me. Well, brother Impeta replied right away, "Dear Friend, it is a great pleasure for me to find that this book has brought us together once again. Of course, I would send it to you, and I'll call on other colleagues to send you books." He wrote to me that he had published my letter written in proper Dutch in a Dutch newspaper, and he invited other colleagues to send him books, as he who could write in Dutch like that, is most certainly fond of reading. This started a book avalanche onto me. The postman couldn't even deliver all at once, so I had to go and get them. Of course, I got letters. One of the letter writers, whose name was Kadero and who lived in Breda, sent my thank-you letter to Dr Impeta, a good childhood friend of his, and asked him to invite me over on a summer holiday. Dr Impeta immediately wrote to me asking me if I had accepted. At that time, there was no such thing, you could only go abroad to visit relatives. But I said that if it was possible, I would do it. It was 1962, and I wrote to him that I could only go in 1963. That's what we agreed on. But as much as I was happy about it, I was also frightened because I was told that I might have to preach there. So, I started to re-learn Dutch. I asked Dr Impeta for books, grammar, newspapers, and I started to learn from them. But I didn't just

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His lectures, in which, besides depicting our sad state of affairs, he expressed the hope for the development of a new Calvinistic life, held the attention of the audience to a great extent. He visited 12 places, and he was everywhere received with the greatest affection, not without thoughtful and pleasant surprises. In Rotterdam, the Hungarian flag was laid on the table at which he spoke. In Amersfoort, at the youth meeting, he was welcomed with the Hungarian national anthem. Both the ecclesiastical and the political papers promoted it everywhere, and neither moral nor financial success was lost. The largest audience gathered in Kampen, thanks in particular to the time-consuming and laborious intercession of Dr C. N. Impeta, pastor in Kampen, special friend of the Hungarians. From this terminus of his study tour, Professor Dr T. Hoekstra submitted the following three points to his attention: 1. Keep your youth work inside and under the protection of the Church. 2. Hold on to the genuine Reformed doctrine (Gereformeerde leer). 3. Take great care to live a true, clean, and healthy life by the Scriptures. The relationship that existed between the Hungarian and Dutch churches became even closer by Dobos's trip." [no author] (1928): *Dunántúli Protestáns Lap*. 39, 1. 53. 1928-02-05/6. [https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/DunantuliProtestansLap\\_1928/?pg=27&layout=s&query=impeta](https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/DunantuliProtestansLap_1928/?pg=27&layout=s&query=impeta) (accessed on: 25.10.2023).

have to learn the language, as I was aware that there would be other things they would want to know. So, I started to learn Jewish [sic., Hebrew – Sz. K.] again so that I could at least read because it would be mostly embarrassing if they found out that a Hungarian priest couldn't read Jewish. Because even the maids know theology there. I also reviewed the 5-year plan. But I didn't get my passport in time for 1963, only in the autumn, so I postponed my trip until 1964. I used the time to study. I left on 25 May and arrived on the 29<sup>th</sup>. I was very curious to see the old Netherlands, which had been so kind to me back then. But I was also curious to see how it had developed. Has it lost its colonies, how much poorer had it become? Do the Dutch grieve it? There was also a great deal of shock in the church after the two world wars.

*Religious relations:* What you need to know about the Netherlands is that religious circumstances over there are different from ours. There are heaps of churches. When I arrived 36 years ago, I was asked what my religion was. I answered with confidence that I was Reformed. But what kind of Reformed? – they asked. Namely, there are two major Reformed churches over there: the Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk. The former being the original one, which has developed since the Reformation, and from which a large group broke away at the start of the last century, in 1834, because they were not satisfied with the purity of the doctrine. [...] And around the middle of that century yet another group emerged, the Abraham Kuyper group, around 1860.<sup>29</sup> They professed to be a suffering church, suffering for justice. The two groups merged in 1892, and from that came the Gereformeerde Kerk, or strict Reformed Church, as we refer to it in Hungarian. We call the other one the state church. [...]

*Growth of the population:* The Dutch people are very fertile. Even today, a normal family has at least 4 children [...] Recently, there have been talks about modelling families, birth control. There have even been great debates about it, but every church develops its understanding on theological-ethical grounds. [...]

*Living standards:* The living standards of priests are worthy of mention. They are doing well. [...]

*Church attendance:* In a congregation of 800 souls, an average of 5-600 attend Sunday morning worship. But even in the afternoon and evening 4-500 remain. You hear a lot lately that even people in the West don't go to church either. In many places, this is true – for

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<sup>29</sup> The year is wrongly given here; according to sources, the correct year is 1886. See JAKOS 1942, 33; LÁNYI 2018, 223.

example, in West Germany, but in America and the Netherlands people do attend church. And they not only go to church, but they also donate.

[...]

*On agriculture:* [...] This region is famous for being covered by the sea at the time I studied there. [...] In 1952, they started pumping and prepared the soil for farming. [...] It's all built by design, planned almost to the millimetre. [...]

[...]

*Ministry:* [...] It is not the deacon and the bishop who supervise the pastors there but the presbytery – that is the biggest warden. [...]

[...]

The Dutch are so frightened by the situation in Hungary that they dare not come outright for fear of not being allowed back. It was easy for me because I didn't have to lie when I told them that things were much better here today and invited them to come and see it for themselves.<sup>30</sup>

In the cited document, Dezső Szabó also reports on donations within the church, pensions, the financial situation of the Roman Catholic Church, the ecumenical situation, Dutch agricultural cooperatives, the new generation of pastors, Dutch–Hungarian relations, the church organization, and the order of services.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the report, the document contains a note that the political police has ordered that a copy of the report “be given to the counter-intelligence line officer for further use”.<sup>32</sup>

Following this report, the informant continued to monitor and report on Dezső Szabó and other pastors who had contacts in the Netherlands (for example, on Sándor Pais).<sup>33</sup> Later, the informant (dean) also became proactive (he himself was born in Upper

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<sup>30</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092, digital pages: 61–66. “Report of the informant codenamed ‘János Varga’ dated 23 October 1964.” [Translated by Augusta Szász]

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092, digital page 67.

<sup>33</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092. pl. 33–34, digital page 85.

Austria and was in regular correspondence with relatives in Austria, even reporting about himself) after he had seen that the revitalized, grassroots Dutch relations were becoming more and more lively, and invited over the financial officer of the strict Dutch Reformed Church, Mr Larnus, in 1965. At the end of the report, which was marked “Dezső Szabó”, the liaison officer noted, “the report has operational value. It describes the pastors of the Mezőföld church county who have some kind of foreign connection. He also has appropriate intelligence capabilities towards these persons, which will be used later. [...]”<sup>34</sup> And in 1966, the same informant (the dean) wanted to get a car from the strict Dutch Reformed Church and asked permission from Bishop Lajos Bakos. “It is appropriate to use the relationship with the Dutch for such a purpose” – this was told to the informant by his bishop after arguing that the Dean of the Vas-Zala Reformed Church County of had received a promise from the other Dutch Reformed church that the motor bikes he had asked for were to be sent.<sup>35</sup>

## Summary

Dezső Szabó’s revival of his Dutch contacts gives us an episodic glimpse into the everyday life of the 1960s under the Kádár regime. The following interview with Pastor Zita Tóthné-Szakács published in 2022 is a good example of Dezső Szabó’s character:

By the way, thanks to Reverend Dezső Szabó, I don’t script my sermons anymore, rather, I prepare a draft and preach *ad libitum*, because he took my sermon from me and then told me to write a draft and bring that to the pulpit, because it was inauthentic to preach by reading out your sermon or simply reciting it. And although I saw my father’s generation preach by reciting their sermons word for word, I had to learn how to preach from a draft while at the side of uncle Dezső Szabó. [...] Sándor Juhász, the Dean-of Alsónémedi, wanted

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<sup>34</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092, digital page 85. “Report of the informant codenamed ‘János Varga’ dated 19 March 1965.”

<sup>35</sup> ÁBTL – 3.1.2. – M – 30092, digital page 124. “Report of the informant codenamed ‘János Varga’ dated 6 April 1966.”

me to join him, but Sándor Szabó, the Dean of Mezőföld, said “no, the girl is ours” – and so I ended up in Káloz-Csősz, where the already mentioned pastor of Káloz, Dezső Szabó was a fantastic soul. He had contacts from his time studying in the Netherlands, with whom he corresponded extensively,<sup>36</sup> and he asked for help for the pastor families in Transdanubia that he kept records of, according to their needs, such as winter coats, theological literature, children’s clothes, medicine, but he would never ask for anything for himself. I heard him say that it is merely our job to take care of those whom God entrusts upon us because God also assigns those who take care of us. That mentality was instilled in me. The pastors in Transdanubia were very cohesive, with functioning small societies even though the state disliked it at the time.<sup>37</sup>

For the three questions raised in the introduction, we received answers – although not extensively. It can be concluded that the Dutch experience was part of Dezső Szabó’s identity. The environment of the church’s laws and politics in the 60s particularly defined and allowed for the revival of the Dutch relationship and Dezső Szabó’s ministry in the Netherlands. And the archival documents from the State Security Archives<sup>38</sup> that have been found so far show the duality of the period and the risks and challenges of pastoral ministry. The direction of the research and the processing of additional documents from archives and family collections will provide insight into the search for a way forward in the shadow of official church relations, which have had an impact on the Reformed identity of the families involved and the Dutch and Hungarian congregations to this very day.

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<sup>36</sup> The letters and photos are in the family’s possession according to the kind account of Dezső Szabó’s son, Dezső Szabó Jr, his wife, Erzsébet, and son-in-law, Imre Pétervári.

<sup>37</sup> KUTASINÉ MOLNÁR, Boglárka: *Az egyház az közösség, Krisztus teste, tehát több, mint ami látszik*. Interview with Pastor Zita Tóthné-Szakács conducted on 28 January 2022. <https://megvanirva.hu/az-egyhaz-az-kozosseg-krisztus-teste-tehat-tobb-mint-ami-latszik/> (accessed on: 13.11.2023).

<sup>38</sup> The Historical Archives of the State Security Services (ÁBTL). <https://abtl.hu/english/>.

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