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## **THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

**Gábor Éhmann:**

**Soldier and priest**

**The Life of István Tabódy (1921-2000)**

„I am the wheat of God and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.” (Saint Ignatius of Antioch)

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## **I. Background and Objectives of the Research**

In the three decades following the political transition of 1989–90, numerous studies have been published on the 20th-century history of the Hungarian Catholic Church, particularly concerning the period after 1945, the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight, and the Church-related policies of the Kádár era. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this history, it is essential to examine individual biographies and life paths that complement the broader ecclesiastical history of the era. With my doctoral dissertation, I aim to contribute to this exploratory work by conducting an in-depth study of the life of István Tabódy.

My goal is to present Tabódy's life in its entirety and to explore the intersection of his life and career with the historical period under examination. This dissertation seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature: while many historians have studied his activities—especially his involvement in the case of the expelled seminarians—no comprehensive account of his life has yet been written. Although Tabódy was not among the leading figures of the Hungarian Catholic clergy and was not granted a leadership position within his diocese, circumstances nevertheless placed him in a crucial role in shaping the Vatican-loyal priesthood. Furthermore, his life served as a moral compass for many clerical and lay believers alike. For this reason, I believe his role is indispensable in the study of this period.

István Tabódy spent a total of 6,896 days in the prisons and internment camps of the communist dictatorship, including four and a half years in solitary confinement. This places him in second place—after Ödön Lénárd—on the symbolic podium of those who endured the longest imprisonment due to religious persecution. An internal document prepared by the Kádár-era State Security categorized him as an "incurable element" because he was not only concerned with his own fate but also with that of his Church. But what led to such severe punishment and suffering?

I became interested in his story long before beginning my doctoral studies. As an altar server and a child fascinated by history, I had the opportunity to hear many intriguing and dramatic details of his life. I met some of his fellow prisoners from the Recsk labor camp (such as Kálmán Kéry and Tibor Zimányi), his fellow priests, as well as members of the Knights of Malta and the Order of the Valiant. On one occasion, I encouraged him to write his memoirs, but he replied that others would write his story. It was then that I decided that I would be the one to compile the events of his life. This decision ultimately led to the writing of my dissertation.

Through my research, I came to know Tabódy's relatives, his fellow priests—particularly those secretly ordained—and I heard many dramatic and often tragic life stories. As a result, I uncovered an extraordinary 20th-century life path, one that is highly unique and deeply personal—a life filled with struggles and crosses to bear.

## **II. Sources and Methods of the Research**

The life and activities of István Tabódy are documented in thousands of pages of archival sources, press materials, and contemporary recollections, providing an abundance of research material.

Tabódy was a high-priority target for the Hungarian state security services, and the Historical Archives of the State Security Services (ÁBTL) holds an extensive collection of records related to him. As of the time of writing, a search for his name in the archive's database yields materials

spanning over 212 storage units. For my research, I utilized documents specifically related to his internment between 1947 and 1953 in Buda-South, Kistarcsa, and Recsk, compiled into three dedicated volumes. The operational and investigative files concerning the activities of the Central Seminary in 1956 are contained in eight volumes, including Tabódy's interrogation transcripts. The case files of the Central Seminary from 1958–61 are extensively documented in the six volumes of *The Expelled*, along with one volume dedicated to "Tabódy" and six to "Rédly and Associates." These materials provided an in-depth look into the operations of the State Security. Additionally, numerous informant reports on Tabódy offer valuable insights into the workings and focus areas of state security. Given that these reports underwent strict verification by the authorities, they serve as reliable sources for understanding various aspects of his activities. I paid particular attention to the reports from prison informants embedded alongside Tabódy, which revealed a secondary series of interrogations.

I cross-referenced Tabódy's trial records with materials from the Budapest City Archives (BFL) and the National Archives of Hungary (MNL OL). These sources included arrest and search warrants, interrogation and witness statements, self-confessions, trial documents from the Budapest Metropolitan Court, indictments, court transcripts, verdicts, and clemency petitions.

I also examined the records of the State Office for Church Affairs, which provided a comparative perspective against state security operations. Among these documents is a letter from Tabódy to Prime Minister András Hegedűs, written just weeks before the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution. The Military History Archives (HL) contained detailed records of his military studies at the Kőszeg Military Realschule and the Ludovika Academy. Additionally, I reviewed records from the Budapest Prison and Penitentiary Archive, as a significant number of documents were generated during Tabódy's incarceration between 1961 and 1972, particularly regarding his conduct in prison and the background to the repeated rejections of his clemency requests.

Since Tabódy served as a priest in the Diocese of Székesfehérvár, my research also drew from the Székesfehérvár Episcopal and Cathedral Chapter Archives (SzfVPL), which hold personal records on him and documents from his pastoral assignments in Bicske, Kisláng, and Csabdi. For Bicske and Csabdi, I utilized the *Historia Domus* as well. The Central Seminary Archives provided additional information about his studies in Budapest from 1954 to 1959. Furthermore, the Central Military Archives of the Hungarian Defence Forces contained records on his military service from 1941 to 1947 and his recognition after the political transition.

Oral history was also an essential component of my research. Since Tabódy lived through the political transition, he was able to speak more openly about his past and reflect on it. However, oral history has its challenges, including the inconsistencies of memory in old age and the influence of personal myth-making. As a researcher, I had to approach these narratives with a critical perspective. Fortunately, Tabódy was remarkably candid about his past, which greatly aided my work. A shared characteristic of these recollections is that the accounts were recorded or written decades after the events—sometimes forty to fifty years later—by elderly individuals who had lived through the regime change. These sources contributed to a deeper understanding of the human emotions behind historical events and the personal trajectories shaped by history. However, given the influence of subjective perceptions and retrospective interpretations, I subjected these sources to rigorous critical analysis.

One of my greatest regrets is that I was unable to conduct in-depth interviews with Tabódy himself, as I only gained access to archival materials after his death, and his declining health in his final years made personal reflections difficult.

To complement my research, I also examined press materials related to István Tabódy's life. These sources were particularly valuable in reconstructing the work of his father, Tibor Tabódy,

as well as his 1947 arrest and post-transition activities. Press articles illustrated how the regime crafted an enemy image of Tabódy.

Additionally, I incorporated materials from the family's private collection and interviews I conducted personally, allowing me to gather testimonies from living witnesses. The photographs, objects, notes, and correspondence preserved in the family archives enriched my research and served as control sources, just as the interviews with surviving contemporaries helped unravel the complexities of Tabódy's network and relationships.

### **III. The Scientific Results of the Research**

In my doctoral dissertation, I attempted to present the life and career of István Tabódy based on the available sources and academic literature.

- The military and the priesthood—two fundamentally different vocations—often intertwined in his life and became an integral part of his personality. This was what made him unique, what made him distinctively "Tabódyan." Tabódy's youth was defined by the military. At the age of ten, he was already a cadet in Kőszeg, later becoming a hussar lieutenant at the Ludovika Academy. He was only deployed to the front after the German occupation, and within a few months, he was seriously wounded in the hopeless struggle against the Soviet army on the Polish front. During the brief post-war coalition period, he was reinstated in the newly formed army, but two years later, shortly after being promoted to captain, he was arrested and interned. After the regime change, he regained his rank and was later awarded the high honor of major general. His military upbringing, eleven years of military training, and the example set by his outstanding teachers (e.g., Károly Matthia) provided him with the resilience to endure both physical and psychological trials, whether during interrogations or imprisonment. It is also worth noting that the skills he acquired through military training proved invaluable in organizing seminarians and in the internment camps.
- He began his priestly training relatively late, in 1954, at 33, making him nearly fifteen years older than his fellow students and significantly more experienced in life. He was not socialized in ecclesiastical circles, did not attend a religious school, and had only a superficial ecclesiastical education. Later, he was able to exert influence through personal anecdotes drawn from his own life and his charismatic personality.
- In the seminary, he attended as an extraordinary student, being examined not by the professors of the Academy but by former teachers of the Diocese of Székesfehérvár, which granted him a degree of independence. Moreover, his priestly training was repeatedly interrupted due to state-imposed bans and a seven-month prison sentence. As a result, he spent only a fraction of the required time in the seminary. The various stages of his ordination were also obtained under rather adventurous circumstances, amidst bans and imprisonment. Although he was ordained by his bishop in 1958, due to his imprisonment and other reasons, he could only begin his regular priestly service in the fall of 1973. Even then, the authorities kept him under constant surveillance until nearly the regime change. His self-perception is well illustrated by the fact that, just as he initially did not know how to ride a horse as a hussar, he did not know Latin as a priest, yet these two vocations remained inseparable in his life. Summarizing everything in his old age, he expressed it as follows: "I am God's enlisted soldier, and I will remain so until He calls me to report."
- Following the example of his father—who pursued a political and military career, maintained ecclesiastical connections, and was a Knight of Malta—István Tabódy briefly engaged in politics. However, this, along with his correspondence with Sophie Horthy, led to six and a half years of internment, prompting him to distance himself from political involvement thereafter. The other legacy he inherited, his extensive network of

connections, became a lifelong resource, particularly in his relationships with Lajos Shvoy, István Zadravetz, and József Mindszenty. Tabódy's family belonged to Hungary's middle nobility, which had severe repercussions under the communist regime, especially concerning court verdicts and clemency petitions. Despite this, he never sought to conceal or downplay his origins. On the contrary, he frequently emphasized them, declaring that he would never compromise or hide simply because he was a Tabódy—or even more so, because he was a priest.

- Tabódy's career and role were deeply intertwined with his network of connections. Before 1945, his supportive relationships primarily stemmed from family ties, mostly of a familial and ecclesiastical nature. However, many of these connections disintegrated in the post-1945 world. As a military officer who did not belong to the highest social elite but aspired to it, he lost the world in which he had been socialized. In its place, he built his own network, consisting of fellow soldiers and inmates from the internment camps. This network increasingly included civilians, while his ecclesiastical relationships were forged among those who had endured imprisonment—those "tested by fire" (such as Imre Mócsy, Piusz Halász, and Ödön Lénárd).
- His connection to the Church was rooted in his childhood. His father was the lay president of the Regnum Marianum parish, led at the time by Lajos Shvoy, who later became the bishop of Székesfehérvár. Shvoy baptized Tabódy and became his confirmation sponsor. When Tabódy made the relatively late decision to pursue the priesthood, he turned to Shvoy in Székesfehérvár, regarding him almost as a surrogate father. Shvoy supported him throughout his seminary years and advised him in organizing dismissed seminarians. (Symbolically, during the secret ordinations conducted by István Zadravetz, it was Shvoy who lent him the episcopal insignia.) Another significant religious role model for Tabódy was József Mindszenty, Archbishop of Esztergom, who had known the family since his time as a parish priest in Zalaegerszeg. Although they did not meet frequently, Tabódy felt that the cardinal regarded him as a son—perhaps because, after the death of his father, it was Mindszenty who handed him his father's cross. During the 1956 revolution, Tabódy remained composed and wise in his reactions. He was prepared to follow the cardinal's directive to lead the seminarians in service, though this ultimately did not take place. Mindszenty, in turn, made multiple attempts to intercede for Tabódy's release.
- Tabódy was not broken by the world of internment camps; rather, it became the cradle of his priestly vocation. *"If I had not found myself in such circumstances, I would never, under any conditions, have become a priest. I never blamed these people, nor did I ever hate them; even now, I think of them with love."* He would often say, *"Revenge is not a productive goal."* He practiced the heroic virtue of forgiveness at the highest level. A prime example is the *"I love you"* story from Recsk, as well as his attitude toward György Halász and the informer known as "Ski Cap." He even forgave the agent who betrayed him and managed to establish a human relationship with local party leaders in the 1970s and 1980s.
- His personal qualities enabled him to influence people, whether seminarians, the women who organized Vatican connections, or even young people, among whom he moved with ease. This was partly due to his own life example (internment camps, escapes, defiance, military attitude) and partly because his fight for his comrades lent him credibility. He fought for others—whether in battle against Soviet tanks or in the internment camps of Buda-South, Kistarcsa, and Recsk, where he sought to dissuade his despairing companions from suicide. Later, he continued this fight as the *primus inter pares* at the Central Seminary, as the leader of the secret seminary after his exclusion, in prisons for better conditions, and after the regime change, for his parishioners.
- The different phases of his life clearly reflect the political (and church-political) changes of the era. He often said that through his own experiences, God was training him in how to prepare the excluded seminarians. He became a key figure in the church history of the period. After his ordination, he created an environment where he became a

central figure in the replenishment of the priesthood, providing a strong and uncompromising response to the communist state. His life path vividly illustrates how the policies of the Rákosi and Kádár regimes were closely connected. In the eyes of the system, István Tabódy was a repeat offender, repeatedly punished, and fundamentally incompatible with the communist-socialist order—an individual who could never be "consolidated." Tabódy opposed the *peace priest movement* that cooperated with the communist regime and worked to establish an underground network for recruiting new priests. Less than two years after his ordination, he was already arranging priestly ordinations, running a seminary, maintaining secret channels of communication with the Holy See, and, before his arrest, even attempting to alter the ecclesiastical hierarchy (through clandestine episcopal consecrations), though his imprisonment ultimately prevented this. In addition to his organizing efforts, he also found time to compile a register listing the names of priests who collaborated with the communist state, preparing for a future in which justice might be served.

- For the Political Police and later State Security, Tabódy was a special figure in 1947, 1957, and 1961. He was a convenient example of the enemy of the system, which is why the press prominently used his image. He was considered a major catch in 1947 when, as a member of the Freedom Party and a former Ludovika cadet, he corresponded with Miklós Horthy's grandson. His arrest served as a warning to opponents of the emerging communist regime. The same applied in 1957, when his arrest sent a message to the church (supporters of Mindszenty and underground priestly formation), aspiring political renewal movements, and military officer groups. Paradoxically, in 1956, Tabódy acted as a restraining force among the young seminarians inspired by the revolution, representing caution and composure. By 1961, during the mass arrests, he became the link between the party leadership's view that the 1957 sentence had been too lenient and the seminarians expelled in 1959 for rebelling against the *peace priest* movement. After his arrest in 1961, interrogators employed every possible method to break him, including informants planted in his cell. They used a wide range of tactics, from death threats to the promise of a bishopric. However, they failed to extract a detailed confession from him. During his long prison sentence, he was regarded as a bitter enemy of the state—an unyielding priest who held firm to his faith. Even after his release, he remained under surveillance. Some informants even cultivated close relationships with the Tabódy family to gain access to him. It is essential to recognize that State Security achieved its primary goal: isolating Tabódy from the leadership of the Catholic Church. In his recollections, he frequently blamed the official church hierarchy for his downfall and sentencing, though in reality, it was the secret police that played the decisive role. The fact that he was offered a bishopric in exchange for a confession remained a bitter, recurring topic for him until his death.
- A key question remains regarding Tabódy's responsibility for the fate of the *secretly ordained* priests. Was he accountable for the seminarians whose ordination he arranged in secret, without state authorization, leaving them without official recognition for years? Could it be interpreted that State Security and the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH) used Tabódy—the eternal rebel—as a pretext to weaken or even dismantle the Central Seminary, given that he led the resistance? Even his appointment as *primus inter pares* at the seminary raises several questions. Later, he was accused of having ruined the institution through his hot-headedness and rebellious attitude. However, recollections—dating back even to his 1957 trial—suggest that the seminarians would have opposed the leadership even without him. His crucial role was in supporting them after their defiance, ensuring they could complete their studies and be ordained. Interrogations revealed that he defended his fellow priests, bishops (such as Mihály Endrey and Lajos Shvoy), and the Vatican with unwavering loyalty, even beyond rational limits. As a result, Tabódy received the harshest sentence (12 years) in the era's great anti-church trials. A confession from him could have facilitated a much

broader crackdown. His punishment was meant to serve as an example to others who might still be *integrated* into the system.

- Upon his release in the late 1970s, Tabódy was a broken man who outwardly conformed to the system, living the quiet life of a rural parish priest. During his active priesthood, he became known as a *builder priest*, restoring churches and parishes in Csabdi, Kisláng, and Bicske. Since Csabdi and Kisláng were small villages, the regime considered him less of a threat there, and State Security effectively isolated him from the youth. While in 1961 he had been convicted for organizing a secret seminary and accused of treason due to foreign contacts (which excluded him from the 1960s amnesty decrees), by the 1980s, the government's financial troubles meant that foreign-sourced church funds—once condemned—were now quietly welcomed for church renovations.
- After the regime change, Tabódy became a figure of national interest. Articles about his life and public appearances frequently appeared in the press. He often attended commemorative events, blessings of monuments, and memorial masses, which honored both his military and clerical identities, as well as his past persecution. He was even initially involved as a Catholic delegate in the newly reestablished military chaplaincy. A documentary was made about him, though it was only aired on Hungarian Television on a weekday evening. However, the regime change did not—and could not—bring him the recognition from the church that he longed for. This is why he valued the honors he received from the military, the *Order of Vitéz*, the Knights of Malta, and other organizations. His tragedy was that by the time of the transition, he was already in his seventies, and the military role that had offered him some vindication lasted only a few years. The greatest satisfaction for him would have been serving as *Bishop of the Military Ordinariate*, but due to his age and circumstances, this was no longer possible. The 6,896 days he spent in prison left their mark, both physically and spiritually. The military's recognition and role gave him some solace for the lost years (though the internal conflicts of the *Order of Vitéz* drained him). Following in his father's footsteps, it was also significant for him to become a Knight of Malta. His parishioners in Csabdi, Kisláng, and Bicske loved and respected him.

## IV. Publications on the Topic of the Dissertation

Éhmann, Gábor. "Tabódy István internálása." In *Utak és útkeresztveződések: Ünnepi tanulmányok M. Kiss Sándor tiszteletére*, 367-379. Budapest, 2013.

Gaganetz, Péter, and István Galambos, eds. "A huszárból lett pap – Tabódy István az '56-os események forgatagában." In *A vidék forradalma – 1956, tanulmánykötet*, 67-80. Budapest: TITE, 2012.

Horváth, Miklós, ed. "Tabódy István börtönbüntetése és kiszabadítására tett kísérletek (1961-1972)." In *A diktatúra évtizedei: Tanulmányok, esszék, előadások*, 309-351. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK, 2013.

"Katona és pap." *Életünk* 7, 75-89, 2011.

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### Other Published Writings on the Topic

Éhmann, Gábor. "Emlékezés Tabódy Istvánra." *Új Ember*, 9, 26 February 2012.

"A történelmi véna." *Bicskei Élet*, October 2015.

"Centenárium emlékévk Tabódy István tiszteletére." *Bicskei Élet*, April 2021.

### Published Review

Éhmann, Gábor. "Recenzió: Speck István: A Szilai-ügy. Budakeszi, 1956 Budakeszi Kultúra Alapítvány, Budakeszi, 2011." In *A diktatúra évtizedei. Tanulmányok, esszék, előadások*, edited by Miklós Horváth, 351-354. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK, 2013.