

For the beatification of János Esterházy

The cross is our sign

Servant of God János Esterházy. His life and martyrdom.

This web site has been prepared to enable readers to become better acquainted with Count János Esterházy, one of the most prominent Hungarian statesmen of the 20th century. He lived in Czechoslovakia and he eventually became a martyr. His life and spiritual legacy are linked to the history of five peoples: the Hungarians, Slovaks, Poles, Czechs and Jews.

One of the most outstanding public figures in that world was Count János Esterházy, who gave speeches in perfect French at the conference of the League of Nations in 1931, when he was still very young and who, as the political leader of the Hungarians living in Slovakia, took the trouble to visit the people he was responsible for in the remotest places of the country. He was an active member of parliament in both Prague and Bratislava and nominally also in Budapest. He was repeatedly falsely accused, arrested and imprisoned in four countries. He was the only member of the Slovakian parliament who voted against the law on the deportation of the Jewish population. He was persecuted simultaneously by the Arrow Cross Party and the German Gestapo. He was later deported and sent to a USSR Gulag by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). He was also sentenced to death in his own country whilst in the forced labour camp but was later "pardoned" and sentenced to life imprisonment instead.

János Esterházy was born on March 14 1901 in Velké Zálužie (Hun. Nyitraújlak), which is currently located in Slovakia but which, in 1901, belonged to the historical Kingdom of Hungary – part of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which after the World War I (1914-1918) split up into many different states including the Czechoslovak Republic. His father was Count János Mihály Esterházy (1864-1905), an officer of the army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He met his future wife, Countess Elzbieta Tarnowska (1875-1956, daughter of Stanislaw Tarnowski, the rector of the Jagiellonian University) in Cracow, while stationed there with his regiment. They got married on 8 January 1898 and settled on the Esterházy family estate in Nyitraújlak, where János (the father), having left the army, wished to devote himself to his family. Unfortunately, he died too early – after only seven years of marriage – to fulfil this plan. Although his widow could have returned to Poland to live on her parents' estate, she remained in Nyitraújlak and raised her children Lujza (1899-1966), János and Mária (1904-1975) alone. She spared no effort to enable them to have an undisturbed and happy childhood. She educated them giving priority to the Catholic faith, its teaching and practices, the growth of Christian humanity, love of neighbour, the veneration of their ancestors and loyalty to their nation.

After finishing his home education, János Esterházy studied economics in Budapest from 1916 to 1920, then he became head of the family and returned to Nyitraújlak to manage the family estate.

As a result of the Peace Treaty of Trianon – Versailles, France, that ended World War I, the northern territories of historical Hungary – including a more than one million-strong Hungarian population and the Esterházy estate near to Nitra – became part of the newly established Czechoslovakia. The Esterházy estates were nationalised but, pursuant to the so-called retroactive taxation law, which entered into force along with the land reform, the family had to pay taxes on the basis of the original size of their estates. As a result of these heavy burdens, the Esterházy family found itself in a difficult economic situation, similar to that of many other aristocratic and wealthy families.

On 23 March 1920, the Provincial Christian-Socialist Party founded by Rev. Ágoston Fischer-Colbrie, bishop of Kassa/Kosice, held its first convention in Bratislava. Thus, the party could take part in the general parliamentary elections announced by the Czechoslovak government in April 1920 and,

having polled the required number of votes, it obtained seats in the parliament in Prague. The young János Esterházy followed with interest the activity of this party which consisted from the start of mainly Catholic Hungarians, Slovaks and Germans.

On 15 October 1924, he married Countess Livia Serényi. They had two children: János (1929-2018) and Alice (1932-).

His rhetorical skills and command of languages led to his election as chairman of The Central Bureau of the League of United Hungarian Opposition Parties in Czechoslovakia in 1931. As an opposition politician, he always acted according to the law and regulations. He asserted the right of self-determination of the Hungarian minority as well as the complete autonomy of Slovensko and Carpathian Ruthenia (Transcarpathia). He sought guarantees, that the government would support the national, religious and cultural development of all its citizens in accordance with the prevailing legal framework and with reference to the nations right of self-determination and to the Constitution of Czechoslovakia.

Nevertheless, President Benes offered Esterházy the position of Minister without Portfolio since he considered him to be a trustworthy politician. He declined the offer saying that he could not accept such a position until the Czechoslovak government first took the necessary measures to earn the trust of the Hungarian minority.

After the 1938 Munich Agreement, which annexed Sudetenland – i.e. the part of western Czechoslovakia that was populated by Sudeten Germans – to Germany, the political leaders of the Hungarians, and primarily Esterházy, encouraged people to stay calm and to resist reactionary ideas. When World War II broke out, he emphatically asked people to obey the voice of their conscience. He and his party took an active part in organising the reception of Polish refugees in Hungary, as a result of which the Slovakian authorities placed him under police surveillance. In his speeches and writings, he often highlighted the inevitable common destiny, fraternal interdependence and solidarity of the nations of Central Europe. In his official statements, he used the motto "THE CROSS IS OUR SIGN" to express his rejection of Nazi and Communist ideologies, both of which were hostile to the Gospel. On that subject, the most significant date is 15 May 1942, when the Slovak government brought before the national assembly the anti-Semitic Bill No68 (amending the Constitution) to deport the Slovakian Jews to Germany. On the basis of his Catholic faith and the fundamental values of Christianity and humanity, he was the only deputy present in the chamber who did not vote in favour of the law which he described as "impious and inhumane".

At the end of the war, Esterházy was arrested by Soviet soldiers entering Bratislava but he was released after twelve days in custody. Then he went to see Gustav Husák, communist Commissioner of the Interior (Husák was President of Czechoslovak Socialistik Republik 1975-1990), to discuss with him the ever stronger anti-Hungarian measures taken by the new Czechoslovak Government. Husák had him arrested and handed him over to the agents of the Soviet secret services (NKVD). He spent one year in the Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. Still there, he was sentenced to ten years of forced labour on trumped-up charges. He had to serve his sentence in various forced labour camps in Siberia. As a result of the inhumane conditions, he contracted a serious pulmonary disease (Siberian tuberculosis pneumoconiosis). In the meantime, on 16 September 1947, the Slovak National Court sentenced him in his absence to execution by hanging for high treason and collaboration with the Fascist regime, both of these being fabricated allegations. The Soviet authorities handed over Esterházy, who was in a critical condition, to the agents of the Czechoslovak authorities in charge of internal affairs in April 1949 in Cierna nad Tisou on the border with the Soviet Union. In the meantime his family dispersed; only his younger sister Mária was allowed to keep in touch with him through sporadic correspondence and a few personal visits. He received no proper medical treatment, and his requests for amnesty were rejected stating that his re-education was not yet complete.

He died in the prison of Mirov (in Moravia) on 8 March 1957. Thus, his sufferings in this life came to an end and his martyrdom was accomplished. The request of his family to receive his mortal remains was denied. He was only given a proper and dignified burial on the 70th anniversary of his death sentence, which was also the 6th anniversary of his death.

