

A Good Citizen or a Nazi Spy?
Background of an FBI-Inquiry Against Victor
Gondos Sr.

“Bondansky”

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Introduction

The Hungarian immigrants lived through two World Wars in the United States of America while the US was at war with their original home country. Yet, we have very little information about the wartime Hungarian diaspora in both cases. In this paper, I attempt to present a case study in which I introduce a Hungarian American family, whose head was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during the Second World War.

This original research is based on primary sources I found in the Gondos Family Papers records at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The cornerstone of this research is those FBI inquiry files, which are a part of this archive material. I also frequently use the family correspondence from certain, relevant time periods of their lives such as World War One and Two. To be able to provide some relevant background information about the history of the family, it was inevitable to use a memoir titled *Recollections of My Early Youth, 1908–1921* written by the younger son of the family, Robert Zoltan Gondos, around 1978.¹ The FBI files are among the sources because when Zoltan was collecting material for his memoir in the 1970s, he applied for information about his father, expecting documents from the time of the First World War, and he received this material instead.

The main goal of this paper is to allow an insight into the fact that not only people of Japanese or German origin, but even Hungarians could also become targets of the American authorities – but of course, not nearly to such serious extent. During the research it also turned out that the accuracy of the FBI was not on the expert level. The wartime situation was so tense that the FBI jumped to the smallest rumors and started investigations against even a law-abiding citizen with a good reputation and regular government contracts, and a son (Victor Gondos Jr.) in the American Army. All of these pointed towards loyalty rather than disloyalty. But also, it must be noted that there were some shadowy businesses in their past. So because of this, I think examining this story can be useful to better understand the situation of the wartime minorities in the United States. Thus, the results can be embedded in 20th century American historiography, Hungarian migration history, and the discipline of American Studies.

¹ Gondos, Robert Z. *Recollections of My Early Youth 1908–1921*. Manuscript. Ca. 1978. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978*.

1. Historical background

The Great Depression era, started in 1929, resulted in the rise of several totalitarian dictatorships in Europe. The worldwide recession sharpened social tensions. The number of people in need and despair increased, which provided an opportunity for extreme ideologies (both far left and far right) to gain wider popularity. Although some of them started earlier, such leaders as Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Franco in Spain and Stalin in Soviet Russia were able to establish their own personal dictatorships owing to this situation.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 was an inevitable consequence of the 1919–1920 peace system and the recession. It was initiated by Germany, which invaded Czechoslovakia, Poland and later France. In East Asia, Japan acted similarly, by invading several territories in China in the 1930s, and advancing in the Pacific islands, threatening the American foreign policy interests. These events forced more and more countries to become belligerent in the worldwide conflict.

The United States kept its isolationist foreign policy, however, it supported the British and Russian Allies both financially and by providing supplies. The country managed to stay militarily neutral until the Japanese attack of 1941, which occurred in US territory, without a formal declaration of war. The US–Japanese relations had been continuously worsening since 1931. Furthermore, Japan began an aggressive expansion on the Pacific in 1937, which harmed the American interests. As an answer, the US formed a blockade against Japan to restrict access to raw materials, most importantly to oil. This step made the Japanese government decide whether to resume the expansion or withdraw its fleet. Japan chose the former and so they attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 without an official declaration of war, thus ending the American neutrality.²

This event marked the entry of the United States into World War Two. The United States declared war on Japan on December 8th, and on Germany and Italy on December 11th. Although there was no formal declaration of war on Hungary, the two countries did cease diplomatic relations in December. They became officially belligerent in June, 1942.³

After the country became one of the belligerent nations on the side of the Allies, similarly to the First World War, immigrants living in America who originally came from one of the enemy

² Romsics, Ignác, *A 20. század rövid története* (Budapest: Rubicon, 2011.), 162–163.

³ Frank, Tibor and Tamás Magyarics, *Handouts for U. S. History – A Study Guide and Workbook* (Budapest: Antall József Knowledge Centre, 2018.), 337–340.

countries were declared enemy aliens.⁴ Among them, as it is widely known, the Japanese were treated in the harshest way. In practice approximately 2000⁵ Japanese-Americans were rounded up by the FBI and detained as potential threats for the security of the country. The biggest atrocity against them was the internment of 100–120 thousand⁶ Japanese-Americans (men, women and children), who were placed in prison camps and many of them lost their homes, all possessions and even their businesses. However, 150 thousand Japanese-Americans living in Hawaii were untouched by this kind of hostility and it is also interesting to mention that more than 300 thousand Japanese-Americans served in the US Army during the Second World War.⁷ Besides Japanese-Americans the Federal Government shipped German-Americans into internment camps although in significantly smaller numbers. That is, only those individuals who were considered dangerous were interned but systematical detention did not take place.⁸ As the result of the investigations of the FBI roughly 1400 Germans were arrested due to possible dangerous activity. In addition, they detained more than 250 Italians.⁹

⁴ About the nature of this type of legislation, in the case of World War One, see Nancy Gentile Ford, *The Great War and America: Civil-Military Relations During World War I* (Greenwood, 2002).

⁵ Daniels, Roger, *Coming to America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002.), 303.

⁶ Data are different in academic literature for example Sowell, Thomas, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 171–172; and Daniels, *Coming to America*, 303.

⁷ Sowel, *Ethnic America*, 174.

⁸ *Personal Justice Denied*, 284. <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied>

⁹ Ibid.

2. The Situation of Hungarian Americans in the Belligerent United States

The motivation for the Hungarian participation in the Second World War on the side of Hitler's Germany was rooted in the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon. Some of the territories lost in 1920 were returned by Hitler's help in the two Vienna Awards in 1938 and 1940. But this territorial revision came with a price. In exchange the Kingdom of Hungary was forced to join the Axis by signing the Tripartite Pact, providing military aid to Germany and declaring war on Hitler's enemies including the USA.

For Hungarian-Americans, this situation meant that their old and new homelands – similarly to the First World War – became enemies. Although the bulk of Hungarian immigrants was happy about the territorial gains, they were also worried about the possible consequences of an alliance with Hitler. Thus, the American Hungarian Federation hurried to clarify its position on this issue and sent a memorandum to the American Government on January 7, 1941, almost a year prior to Pearl Harbor in which they stated:

American citizens with Hungarian origin got shocked when they learned that the government of Hungary could not avoid the signing of the treaty of the Axis, and we convinced that due to the signature the Hungarian government lost its freedom of sovereign decision-making.¹⁰

In addition, the movement for Independent Hungary, launched by the well-known emigrant Hungarian politician Tibor Eckhardt also proclaimed that “the Hungarian nation is not responsible for the policies and acts of its present government whose decisions are obviously subject to Nazi pressure.”¹¹ So the prominent figures of the Hungarian-American community worked to make the Americans see that Hungary joined the war only because it was forced by Germany.

After the USA entered the war the Hungarian Americans faced the “divided heart's” dilemma.¹² Most of them were interested in the fate of their fellow countrymen in Hungary. So, when the extent of the destruction in Hungary become visible they immediately organized relief actions to send medicine, clothes and money home. The disaster stimulated to aid even those who had lost their personal ties with their country of origin a long time ago. What is more, the

¹⁰ Várdy, Béla and Ágnes Várdy Huszár, *Újvilági küzdelmek. Az amerikai magyarság és az óhaza* (Budapest: Mundus Kiadó, 2005.), 246.

¹¹ Várdy, Béla *Magyarok az Újvilágban* (Budapest: Magyar Nyelv és Kultúra Nemzetközi Társasága, 2000), 375.

¹² Puskás, Julianna, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982). 406.

elder immigrants got into emotional conflicts with their children, the second generations. The former, understandably, had stronger ties to the old country than the latter, who considered it better not to reveal their Hungarian ancestry owing to the affiliation of Hungary with the fascist Italy and the Nazi Germany during the war. Generally, the majority of Hungarian immigrants showed loyalty to America, their chosen home, as well. They purchased War Bonds, prepared and sent packets of health supplies to soldiers, volunteered to donate blood and most importantly many second generation immigrants even served in the US Army. Moreover, for many of them the war provided economic advantages as the wartime industry was booming resulting in more job opportunities and higher wages.¹³

As it was mentioned before, after the American entry into the war, the enemy aliens were prosecuted, interned, arrested by the American authorities. Significant information is not known in connection with Hungarian immigrants in this sense. What is known, however, is that there were inquiries into the Hungarian community by the OSS. The Office of Strategic Services was founded in 1942 as a wartime intelligence agency. It was the predecessor of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). In the summer of the same year the OSS started inquiring about certain Hungarian-American organizations. It was not a deep investigation for it consisted of an interview with secretary general of the American Hungarian Federation, Tibor Kerekes. Based on Kerekes's answers the OSS concluded that most Hungarians were against the war and the declaration of war on the US left them in dismay. Later, in a long memorandum on July 8, 1943, the Foreign Nationalities Branch of the OSS confirmed that no matter how strongly the revisionist propaganda of Hungary influences Hungarians in America, the bulk of them are still committed to the United States.¹⁴ Based on all this it seems that the Federal Government did not see a real threat in Hungarian-Americans so it did not consider it necessary to take serious actions against them, as it did in the case of Japanese-Americans, for example. But it does not exclude the possibility that there could be actual investigations in individual instances. In this paper, based on original research such an example is provided.

¹³ Ibid. 406–407.

¹⁴ Sándor Szilassy, "Az amerikai magyarság a második világháborúban," *Nyelvünk és Kultúránk* 111, (Július–Szeptember 2000), 48.

3. The Axis Fifth Column vs. the FBI

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was responsible for anti-spy investigations against individuals. The FBI conducted these investigations throughout the country against citizens of enemy countries as well as against American citizens who had origins from enemy nations. The reason of this was the fear from the so called “Fifth Column” activity. The term is used to describe a sort of enemy spy activity which is aimed to help the invading army to get into one’s country. The name “Fifth Column” itself is rooted in the time of the Spanish Civil War when General Emilio de Mola is thought to have said on radio broadcast that the enemy was attacking Madrid in four columns, referring to four different directions, but a fifth column was working inside the city to support the attackers. These can be foreign agents or inside traitors whose task is to demoralize, divide the host country and to assist the enemy regular army in an actual invasion. Espionage, sabotage and subversion could be found among their most frequently used techniques. During the Second World War Italy, Japan and the Soviet Union were all accused of fifth column activities, but it was the Nazi Germany with which the Americans were most concerned in this regard. This concern became a popular and easy answer for the quick German advancement in Europe since many people did not believe that these fast victories (Blitzkrieg) could have happened without actual inside help.¹⁵ This was the basis of the spy hysteria in several European countries, which reached the United States as well despite the fact that Hitler did not really focus on America. On the other hand, their fear was not entirely baseless in the light of the German sabotage and propaganda activity in the USA during the First World War. Nevertheless, the White House and other official institutions announced that the Nazi Fifth Column was incredibly dangerous for the national security.

For the investigation of anti-American actions there were two major organizations, one of which was the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the other was the FBI. The House Committee also known as the Dies Committee, after its chairman Martin Dies, determined that the number of people participating in un-American activities could be around 100 thousand.¹⁶ Investigating upon these individuals however, fell to the FBI. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, established in 1908, received the role of the main law enforcement organization in 1933. By apprehending the most wanted criminals of the time, the agency and its director J. Edgar Hoover gained national popularity and appreciation. They started doing

¹⁵ Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁶ Frank and Magyarics, *Handouts*, 349.

counterintelligence work from 1936 and were appointed to be the leaders in this field in 1939 by President Roosevelt's memorandum in which he wrote: "After a careful check-up on this matter of espionage, counter-espionage and sabotage, I agree that the principal work in this country should be done under the leadership of the F.B.I."¹⁷ From this time on, the bureau operated perpetual surveillance over the American society looking for extremist organizations. Earlier the government's intention to prosecute a crime was needed for this kind of surveillance but during the Second World War the FBI was authorized to do so without the suspicion of an actual crime which means that they could spy on anyone for basically any reason. An unfounded gossip, for instance, could be enough to become a suspect and come under investigation. This is what happened to the individuals, who will be introduced in this study later.

While they tended to cooperate with the authorities, the general public was divided over the level of freedom the FBI received to surveil people. On the one hand, a lot of Americans were afraid that a sort of American version of the Gestapo would be formed arguing that the FBI used too aggressive and freedom threatening techniques. While others were dissatisfied with the work done by Hoover and his men saying that they failed to do enough to keep the country safe from the foreign spies and internal enemies. Beside of this, there was a tendency among citizens to create volunteer groups with spy busting purposes. The leadership of the FBI did not approve of this vigilante behavior because it obstructed the work of the professional investigators. Hoover expected cooperation from citizens but only in the form of "listening posts", that is, to report any suspicious activities they saw and then let the professionals deal with the situation. Hoover also thought the FBI needed wide social support to be successful in counterintelligence. To reach this he had to maintain the fear of inside enemy among the population. He depicted the state of the country in such speeches as the following:

Never in our history has our national security been menaced as it is today. [...] Renegades and termites are everywhere seeking to weaken the structure of democracy; these emissaries from totalitarian governments hope to undermine our nationalism and to implant their doctrines of hate. Subversive forces had penetrated every realm of society seeking allies in our schools, our churches, and our civic organizations. The danger of un-American activities are real and not imaginary.¹⁸

At the same time, he also had to take care that the spy hysteria would not get out of control. He said "America must remain watchful and vigilant, but, at the same time, sensible and calm

¹⁷ MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes*, 166.

¹⁸ Ibid. 179–180.

[...] there is no time for hysteria, wild rumors or hair trigger prejudices.”¹⁹ So Hoover needed to constantly balance the reactions and the opinions of society to be able to do effective work.

Under Hoover’s leadership, the FBI gathered information in a wide scale sometimes even breaking the law. He authorized his agents to collect personal data about everyone who supposedly may sympathize with Germans, Italians or communists because Fifth Column activities were expected the most from these groups. The agents compiled a list of possible members of “various so-called radical and fascist organizations in the United States” as well as editors, publishers and subscribers of all newspapers, which could be linked to fascists and communists. Their aim was to learn the suspected individuals’ names, aims and to map their social networks and all relevant information. The FBI often employed techniques including infiltration, wiretapping, planting bugs, keeping informants, looking into public, personal, school and employment records.²⁰ The list based on these divided the subjects into two categories: those who had to be arrested when their country of origin becomes an enemy to the US, and those who needed to be “watched carefully”.²¹ In two thirds of the cases they investigated completely innocent people many times American citizens. But as the Attorney General soon pointed out, there was no law in existence that gave permission to make “a custodial detention list of citizens”.²² All in all, although Hoover’s methods were not always clean, the Bureau successfully prevented enemy spy activities during the Second World War.²³

¹⁹ Ibid. 181.

²⁰ Weiner, Tim, *Enemies: A History of the FBI* (New York: Random House, 2013.) E-book Version.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes*, 182.

4. The Gondos Family

4.1. Family Background

Before discussing the main topic, it is necessary to provide some important and relevant information as well as some biographical background about the Gondos family who were the subject of the FBI inquiry. I consider it necessary because it will help to better understand the accusations and other statements in the FBI files, and it also might help in making conclusions about the validity of these accusations.

The head of the Gondos family, who is the central character of this study, Victor Gondos, was born in Szilágycseh (Transylvania) on March 15th, 1879, as a son of Dr. Mór Gondos, MD and Rozália Lindenfels. His ancestors originated from Zemplén County, in the eastern part of Hungary. He had two sisters, Fanni and Eszter, and two brothers, Sándor (thereafter: Alexander) and Gyula. Victor graduated as a civil engineer at the Royal Technological University in Budapest, at the beginning of 1900 and later received a doctorate in political science, too. Soon he met his wife, Irene Trautmann at an engineers' ball in Budapest. She was born on July 30th, 1883, in Budapest, into a family of German origin. She received a fine education at a ladies' finishing school. From Victor and Irene's marriage of 1901, two children were born: Victor Jr (July 20th, 1902) and Robert Zoltan (February 2nd, 1905), both in Budapest. In the first years of the 1900s the head of the family worked as an engineer, and also taught mathematics and science at a metallurgical secondary school in Temesvár. By 1906, Victor Sr. came to the conclusion that the career opportunities and the salaries in Hungary are insufficient for his ambitions.

The first time Victor got in contact with America was in 1904. He was delegated by the Austro-Hungarian government to St. Louis, Missouri, to study the local agricultural technology and production development. After another, three-year-long delegation to the USA by the Royal Ministry of Commerce between 1906 and 1909 Victor made a last attempt to get a foothold in Hungary. Since he did not succeed the family immigrated permanently into their chosen country in the summer of 1911 and settled in New York City. About the same time, Victor's brother, Alexander and wife, Gizella followed them, too, to try their luck in the land of opportunities.

Alex Gondos was a slightly well-known figure of the journalistic life of Pest – but not in a good way. He was born on March 21, 1877,²⁴ worked as a journalist in, among others, Budapest, Transylvania and Paris. He had a bohemian lifestyle, and often neglected his duties. He had

²⁴ "United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:K6FK-Q5J>; 24 December 2021), Alexander Samuel Gondos, 1917–1918.

often shady businesses in Hungary for instance scamming people as a hypnotist in coffee houses or selling medicines illegally.²⁵ Once he got in trouble with the Budapest police for harassing and blackmailing a young lady.²⁶ Alexander immigrated to the USA with money he got from working as a book agent. After arriving in America, Victor helped him to find a job but as Alex was “unaccustomed to hard systematic work”,²⁷ he caused a lot of problems to his brother. Soon, he found work as a journalist at the American Hungarian press. He regularly wrote, sometimes under the alias A. S. Glenn, manipulative articles in connection with the domestic situation of Hungary favoring István Tisza’s government. He himself became a subject for newspaper columns for example with his political agitations supporting the Hungarian government by trying to prevent the opposition politician, Mihály Károlyi’s²⁸ American fundraiser trip.²⁹

4.2. In World War One

When the First World War broke out, the situation of citizens of the Central Powers became worse in the United States of America and in 1917, the official and public hostility increased against them. The Gondoses experienced this first hand. In the fall of 1915, Victor Sr. and his brother, Alex were arrested and imprisoned. Their crime was not particularly serious but at those times “there were larger influences at work”.³⁰ The case was the following. Victor and Alex founded an English-language newspaper, named *Bridgeport Daily News*, in which many articles were pro-German, provoking British agents’ attention. In November, Victor Gondos Sr. and his brother, the editors, tried to force a Hungarian banker in Manhattan, Julius Pirnitzer,³¹ to advertise in their newspaper. They threatened him with portraying him negatively in the *Bridgeport Daily News* unless he bought enough advertising space. In their next meeting, Pirnitzer had already waited for them with two private detectives hiding in the next room. After a huge debate, the Gondos brothers were arrested by the two detectives. But as it turned out, the case against them was weak because the dispute between the brothers and the banker took place in Hungarian, so the two American detectives understood nothing. The problem starts

²⁵ Gulyás, Pál, *Magyar írók élete és munkái*, Vol 11 (Budapest: Argumentum, 1992.), 105.

²⁶ Pesti Hírlap, May 19, 1911. 13.

²⁷ Gondos, *Recollections*, 28.

²⁸ Mihály Károlyi (1875–1955) was a Hungarian opposition politician, who was a Member of Parliament from 1910, and went on to become the first President of the Republic of Hungary in 1919.

²⁹ Gulyás, *Magyar írók*, 105.

³⁰ Gondos, *Recollections*, 45.

³¹ Julius Pirnitzer was a Hungarian banker, director of the Transatlantic Trust Company in New York. He himself was accused of anti-American conspiracy and was later detained.

here, because in a normal case an indictment like this would have been off the table in the court. But since the suspicions of subversive activities came to the surface in connection with the brothers, the American Secret Service put pressure on the judge to find the brothers guilty of some misdemeanor. In light of this, it is possible that this pressuring was the reason why the authorities tried to connect the brothers with the organization of a bomb plot, too, as it was revealed from the columns that appeared in newspapers all around the country, from Connecticut to Arizona and also in Hungary.³² As a result of the whole proceedings, they ended up spending six months in the Welfare Island Reformatory but only on charges of attempted extortion.

Due to the two men's prison sentence the family had to face tough times both in financial terms and in their relationships with their ethnic community. First of all, losing the wage-earners made the two wives, Irene and Gizella, to move in together with all four children and one of them had to work. While Irene ran the household, Gizella started working in a factory. In addition to this, the 13-year-old Victor Jr. also took a part-time job in a stockroom and, as some family letters point out, the 10-year-old Zoltan diligently delivered newspapers in the mornings. Finally, to cover their rent they decided to sublet two of their rooms. All these steps proved to be enough to make ends meet narrowly.

The situation of Victor Sr. was further aggravated by the American belligerence. The United States declared war on Germany on 6th April 1917. As a response, two days later the government of Austria–Hungary broke off diplomatic relations with Washington. And then, like other citizens of the Central Powers, the members of the Gondos family automatically became enemy aliens, too. As we learn from the younger son, Zoltan's memoir, Victor Sr. was afraid that any incidents happening in the Remington ammunition factory in Bridgeport will incriminate them and he expected interrogation. Therefore, they decided to move to another city where German sabotage activities were less likely and chose Cleveland, Ohio. After a short time of living in Cleveland, they moved to Dayton (OH), where Alex lived. Shortly after the family's arriving in Dayton, Victor Sr.'s fears came true: he was summoned to the office of the US Marshal to explain the reason of their moving to Dayton, which was a very important place for the aircraft industry during the war. Finally, Victor Sr. managed to convince the marshal that the reason of their moving to Dayton was to get closer to his brother, Alex. The Marshal dismissed him without any further ado. But due to the incident rumors were started about him and for example,

³² For example: The Bridgeport Evening Farmer (CT), New York Tribune (NY), Perth Amboy Evening News (NJ), Richmond Times (VA), The Pensacola Journal (FL), Albuquerque Morning Journal (NM), The Arizona Republican (AZ), and also Pesti Napló, Délmagyarország, Magyarország etc.

his son, Zoltan was jeered in the school for his father being a German spy, even though he was not one.

4.3. Heading towards the American Dream

With signing the armistice on 11th November 1918, the Selective Service Act was invalidated. Thus, the official status of the Gondos family changed from enemy alien to alien automatically. As the war restrictions were lifted, thanks to the economic prosperity, the construction industry in which Victor Gondos Sr. was interested, was also booming. These economic circumstances of the “Roaring Twenties”, and the fact that the family was not regarded as enemy aliens anymore made it possible for Victor Sr. to found his own independent company. During the 1920s the family business was running very well until the time of the Great Depression. In this decade, the Gondos Company constructed many public buildings including schools, silk mills, hotels, and residential buildings, as well. The profits made it possible to take several European trips. The economic crisis reached them in 1932 and they struggled with serious financial problems for a couple of years. Then in 1935, thanks to some degree of political support, the company managed to secure several construction jobs from the Public Works Administration, which was created within the New Deal by President Roosevelt. From now on the company regularly had projects to work on so the family’s financial situation was stabilized.

Beside all this, the fact should not be ignored that Victor’s older son, Victor Jr. chose a military career and he served in the Coast Artillery Reserve Corps from 1924, in addition to working with his father’s company. In 1926 he was promoted to the rank of 1st Lieutenant then in 1930, to Captain. Although this was terminated by a serious illness, his service was highly regarded. According to his military record, he was one of the most active reserve officers during his service. Furthermore, as we can read in the document, his diligence was high above average and without considering time, money or energy he served his country.

5. Analysis

5.1. FBI documents regarding Victor Gondos Sr.³³

During the years of the Second World War the head of the Gondos family came into the sight of the FBI. This part of the study attempts to describe and analyze the contents of the FBI files in connection with the inquiry against Victor Sr. Apart from the files, the family correspondence will also be examined to some extent, searching for clues whether the accusations could have been based on any reality.

The investigation must have been carried out between 1941 and 1943 according to the first report of an FBI agent with an, of course, undisclosed name dated on May 11th, 1943. From this document it is revealed that the reason of the inquiry was some derogatory information the FBI received from an undisclosed source about Gondos. The allegation was that “subject and his son, ROBERT Z., are definitely pro-Nazi”.³⁴ The informant further stated that their every employee was foreigner, one of whom said during the German invasion of the Netherlands that soon everyone in the US would be saying “Heil Hitler!” Moreover, the agency got information from another person who claimed that some Federal Agency had investigated Victor Sr. during the First World War and also one of his employees had recently been arrested due to spying activity. Last but not least, it was also said about the subject that some time in 1941 he was at a meeting of the German American Bund, of which he was a member, and “at this meeting several movies were exhibited concerning Nazi activities.”³⁵ The informant concluded that Victor Sr. was pro-German based on their supposed conversations.

Following these accusations, the Bureau opened the Gondos case. In the ensuing investigation the FBI searched the subject’s office, questioned several acquaintances, neighbors and former co-workers, and also examined a list of different personal and public documents concerning the family members. The investigation was carried out in multiple states including Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Colorado and Washington D.C. The FBI cooperated with city police departments, too, for example in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Dayton, Chicago and New York City, as well as with other official institutions such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the War Department. The most important questions of the FBI for which they wanted to get answers were if the subject was a Nazi supporter, if he was

³³ A modified version of this sub-chapter is planned to be included in a publication (in the Hungarian language).

³⁴ Philadelphia File 100-1369” Nov. 5, 1943, Victor Gondos Sr. Denaturalization Proceedings, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, 1943 pg. 2. FBI Inquiry Files. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978*. 2.

³⁵ Philadelphia File 100-1369, 2.

involved in any spy activities and if he was loyal to the USA at the time of his naturalization. The aim of the inquiry was to determine if a denaturalization proceeding could be started against Victor Gondos Sr.

Victor Sr.'s situation in the eyes of the FBI was made more serious by some factors, which seemed to support the accusations against him. One of these was the fact that he and his brother, Alex, were arrested during the Great War in the infamous extortion scandal described in the previous chapter (IV.2.), which by the way was connected to a possible anti-American plot, even at that time. But this was not the only complication caused by Alex Gondos, the black sheep of the family. As the FBI found out, Alex had purchased a Hungarian newspaper years earlier in Dayton, and he was supposedly aiming to create "the National Foreign Press Association, which could be used for disloyal propaganda."³⁶ So stemming from this, the suspicion about him was that he may still be involved in spreading Hungarian propaganda. Additionally, the Bureau also found it suspicious that in 1918, Victor Sr. lived in Dayton under the alias Bondansky. This was the time when he was interrogated by the U.S. Marshal to whom he admitted that he used this false name because he was afraid to lose jobs due to his criminal record. And it did not help his case either, that he and his wife were false witnesses at Alex Gondos's naturalization hearing in 1929.

The agents worked on this case thoroughly. As it is revealed in the files, a small radio which was found when the subject's office was searched with the help of the Philadelphia Police Department, raised suspicion. After it was inspected by the Federal Communications Commission, they came to the assessment that it was too small to be dangerous. They questioned several witnesses, as well, to get information about the subject's character. All of them said positive things about him and his family. One of them, for example, who lived in the same neighborhood stated although the Gondoses were not liked much in the area because of their foreign origin, they did never do or say anything disloyal to America. In fact, this person remembered that Victor Sr. said once to him "we don't like the Germans; someday Hungary will be free again."³⁷ Another witness assured the agents that she talked a lot of times with Mrs. Gondos and she never heard anything in favor of the Axis but Mrs. Gondos did say that the American anti-German propaganda was a bit raw. One of Victor Sr's former colleagues provided more details to the picture. He claimed that the subject was definitely not a Nazi, on the contrary, when Victor learned about the Nazi sympathy of a friend, he gave up the relationship immediately.

³⁶ Philadelphia File 100-1369, 4.

³⁷ Philadelphia File 100-1369, 4.

In another stage of questioning the witnesses the investigators attempted to determine whether the subject was loyal to the USA or not. All of the four witnesses unanimously stated that there was no question about Victor's loyalty. One of them highlighted that the subject had no interest in Germany or with the Axis, and emphasized that the subject's son worked for the War Department and was "well thought of among the military men." Finally, another witness refuted the accusation about the German American Bund, as well. He told the agents that Victor never was a member of any German organizations and the only occasion when they attended a German event was a singing society meeting. Besides, various documents were examined to get background information about the family. These included their naturalization documents, passport applications, criminal record, credit report, selective service questionnaires, etc. None of these official and personal papers contained any deeming information about any of the Gondos Family members. All the information pointed towards the innocence of Victor Gondos, and the unreliability of the accusations.

Furthermore, there is another aspect, which should not be overlooked. In the examination of the validity of the allegations against the Gondoses, what needs to be considered is the relationship between the Gondos Family and the Federal Government. The distrust on the part of the FBI seems to be contradictory, considering the construction company enjoyed the trust of the Government. During the war, the Gondos Company had a series of contracts from the Federal Government, for constructing military buildings. One of these was a barracks in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, another one was another barracks in Cheltenham, Maryland, as it can be learnt from the memoirs of Robert Z. Gondos.³⁸ This information is confirmed in the FBI files, in fact, it is completed with two additional, also military, projects: a sewage disposal plant for an army camp in Reading, Pennsylvania, and manufacturing test shells for the army at Middletown, PA.³⁹

Although the investigation seemed to be profound, inaccuracies can be found in it. For instance, for the most part of the investigation the FBI got the date of the subject's arriving in the US wrong. The Bureau had the information that Victor Gondos had lived in the United States since 1900, but in fact, he had only arrived in America in 1904 for the first time. The FBI did not consider Irene's German origin, either. They also believed that the older son, Victor Jr. was American born and mistook Alex Gondos with his son. Alex Gondos had a son, Alex Jr, who was approximately the same age as Victor's sons. In one of the FBI files, there is a part, in which we can read that the agents obtained data about an "Alex Gondos", but later they

³⁸ Gondos, *Recollections*, 80–81.

³⁹ Philadelphia File 100-1369, 5.

realized that the person was too young to be the Alex they were looking for. They concluded that it must be his son. The FBI was unable to locate Alex Gondos Sr. in the entire duration of the investigation. They found no evidence for Victor Sr. and Irene being false witnesses back in 1929, either.

But perhaps the most interesting mistake made was that the fact that The Gondoses lived in Bridgeport in 1915 is entirely missing from the files. When the agent listed the places where the family lived in the past, we can find Atlantic City, Dayton, New York, Philadelphia, and Reading but not Bridgeport. Based on this, it can be determined that the FBI most likely was not aware that the family spent more than a year in Bridgeport, which was famous of its role in the ammunition industry during World War One. Victor and Alex were even imprisoned for they were believed to be plotting some kind of sabotage action in the Remington Arms Company. This information would have been relevant considering that the Gondos brothers being Austro-Hungarian citizens, owning a newspaper, in the home of the Remington Arms Company (primary supplier of ammunition for the British and French infantry forces, where many Hungarians worked), this place would have been ideal for them to do disloyal acts. As a matter of fact, both British agents and the American Secret Service had showed vivid interest in the case at the time, suspecting that the brothers were agents of the Central Powers and the newspapers all around the country published articles about these allegations in 1915. So it makes it peculiar how the FBI could ignore these facts.

The investigation was concluded by the FBI in October, 1943. During the inquiries, which consisted mostly of interviewing ex-colleagues, neighbors and other acquaintances, and looking into official documents regarding the family, the Bureau could not find any evidence either to Victor's disloyalty to America or to his sympathy towards Germany. The FBI was also unable to prove that Alex Gondos was spreading enemy propaganda, in fact they were not even able to locate him. So based on the results of more than two-year-long investigation, a US Attorney assessed that "the evidence relating to lack of allegiance and lack of attachment to the principles of the constitution on the part of instant subject does not appear to be sufficient to justify the institution of a denaturalization suit."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "U.S. Attorney fails to institute denaturalization suit" Feb. 28, 1944, Victor Gondos Sr. Denaturalization Proceedings, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, 1943 pg. 2. FBI Inquiry Files. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895-ca. 1978*.

5.2. The contents of the family's correspondence

So, as it turned out from the FBI investigation files, the accusations against Victor Gondos Sr. proved to be completely baseless. Evidently, none of the members of the Gondos Family was working against the country. To look into their more personal views, examining the family correspondence seems fruitful. After reading through the letters, it can be concluded that any clues of unpatriotic activities towards the United States cannot be found in the family correspondence between 1936 and 1946, on the contrary.

In general, the topics of the letters cover usual family matters, for example health and illnesses, work and business, holidays, travels, future plans, everyday topicalities and the weather. Political topics are hardly ever mentioned but their affiliation seems clear from the few exceptions. In a letter dated in 1936, Victor Sr. wrote to his wife, who was in Hungary at the time with Victor Jr., that he registered as an independent and Zoltan as a democratic voter, and both of them “will vote of course for Pres. Roosevelt.”⁴¹ Additionally, Victor Sr. remarks in another letter that “Mr. Roosevelt will miss your votes, but we feel that he can afford to miss them.”⁴² So it seems that all family members were Roosevelt supporters.

Also an interesting bit of information, considering that they were suspected of being Nazi supporters, is that when Irene witnessed the former Hungarian Prime Minister, Gyula Gömbös's funeral in Budapest, she wrote about Hermann Goering in a sarcastic way. She mockingly called him “the greatest ‘aufsehen’”,⁴³ carrying all his decorations on his “big belly”.⁴⁴ Of course, it is not hard evidence but it shows that they do not speak about Nazi leaders with respect. After the American belligerence the war became a recurring topic in their writings. They only discuss average problems of the home front such as rising prices, shortages of supplies, war time rationing, possible military service, etc. However, in one particular letter one week after Pearl Harbor, Zoltan expresses his worries due to their Hungarian origins. As he wrote to his mother “we can no longer afford the luxury of political discussions with friends, no matter how close they are.”⁴⁵ This may have come from their bad experiences in World War I. Furthermore, as it

⁴¹ Gondos Sr., Victor. *Victor Gondos Sr to Irene Gondos. September 17, 1936.* Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.*

⁴² Gondos Sr., Victor. *Victor Gondos Sr to Irene Gondos. October 13, 1936.* Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.*

⁴³ German word for “spectacle”.

⁴⁴ Gondos, Irene. *Irene Gondos to Victor Gondos Sr. October 11, 1936.* Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.*

⁴⁵ Gondos, Robert Zoltan. *Robert Z. Gondos to Irene Gondos. December 14, 1941.* Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.*

is turns out from a letter of 1946, the fact that they had 21,000 dollars in Victory Bonds suggests that they supported the American war efforts.

It is clear from the family archives that the Gondoses lived their everyday lives and had no idea that there was an investigation against Victor Sr. during the war. He continued the leadership of the company until his retirement in 1953. After that he moved to Florida with his wife. In 1944 Zoltan took a job at the Campbell Soup Company as a design engineer, which he kept until his retirement in 1966. Meanwhile, since the early 1940s, Victor Jr., built his archivist and historian career and retired in 1965 from the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Closing Remarks

To sum up, after exploring the case and examining the sources, there is nothing more to do than to answer the titular question: was Victor Gondos Sr. a good citizen or a Nazi spy? Based on the results, it can be safely said that he was definitely not a Nazi spy. Being a good citizen is a bit more complicated question. According to the sources, he was more likely a good, law-abiding citizen, apart from the extortion incident in his past. He was not working against the American government and the American nation, and he did not have any reason to do so, on the contrary. The FBI launched the investigation due to a baseless rumor, and they did not find any evidence against him.

The varied and rich source material about the Gondos family allows a deep analysis from many different points of view in the future. In this paper, I only focused on the aspect described above examining a selection of particular sources (the FBI inquiry files, some family correspondence, and the Recollections, supplemented by some contemporary newspapers). The current study is a part of a much broader, comprehensive research in which the whole scope of the sources can be involved. It is possible to examine such aspects as mapping the family's social network system in the American business and political life, the changes in the use of language, the family members' attitude towards the Hungarian-American community, the maintenance of their connection to relatives in Hungary, and the utility of the memoir in immigration research. Furthermore, I would like to explore the family story in detail after 1945. Both the material and the research mean new addition to the Hungarian historiography of American immigration and the academic literature of American studies. For these reasons I am going to continue working on this topic and I plan to conclude the research in a PhD dissertation.

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