

THE SOLDIER WHO SAVED THE LIVES OF BUDAPEST JEWS: COLONEL FERENC KOSZORÚS

Letter to the Editor from Ferenc Koszorús, Jr., Washington DC

In March 1944, greater Hungary's Jewish population exceeded 800,000. Nazi Germany invaded Hungary and installed a pro-German government that month, drastically changing the situation of the country and resulting in the destruction of its Jewry, which had survived under the pre-invasion conservative government. Adolph Eichmann arrived to direct the deportation of Hungary's Jews so that by the end of June, virtually the entire Jewish population of the provinces had been deported. The more than 250,000 Jews of Budapest were then targeted for deportation by the Nazi occupiers. László Baký, a secretary of state in the Ministry of Interior for "Jewish Affairs" assembled gendarmerie units in furtherance of his plans to carry out the deportation of the Jews of Budapest through a government coup.

At this time, Colonel Ferenc Koszorús had the First Armoured Division under his command. This division had been dispersed around Budapest to prevent the Germans from commandeering it to the front. When Col. Koszorús learned of Baký's plans, he volunteered his services to thwart him in carrying them out. Upon receiving the requested order from Regent Horthy, on 5 July, Colonel Koszorús ordered his units to occupy strategic areas of Budapest and block major roads leading to the city. On 6 July, he ordered Baký to withdraw his gendarmerie units. Baký capitulated in the face of this strong resistance by elements of the Hungarian armed forces and removed his troops by 8 July.

As a direct consequence of Col. Koszorús' and his loyal troops' timely and bold action, the Jews of Budapest were saved from deportation and certain death.

On the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust, Congressman Tom Lantos, a survivor of the Holocaust, referred to Col. Koszorús as "a Hero of the Hungarian Holocaust". He noted that Colonel Koszorús' courageous intervention enabled Wallenberg, who arrived in Budapest on 9 July 1944, to begin his rescue mission. Had Colonel Koszorús not intervened, Wallenberg would have had far fewer lives to save.

Ferenc Koszorús: a Hero of the Hungarian Holocaust – Hon. Tom Lantos
(Extension of Remarks – May 26, 1994) [Page: E1109, Congressional Records]

Hon. Tom Lantos
in the House of Representatives
Thursday, May 26, 1994

Mr LANTOS. Mr Speaker, this year marks the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian holocaust. I rise today to recognize one of the great heroes of the Hungarian holocaust. Ferenc Koszorús, who at great personal sacrifice to his own life, saved thousands of Hungarian Jews from deportation to Nazi death camps.

During the turbulent time in the summer of 1944, advancing Allied forces were closing in on Berlin while Hitler was racing to implement the final solution, the destruction of the Jewish race. There were many acts of heroic compassion and humanitarianism during this period. I would like to recount the story of Col. Ferenc Koszorús, one of the most remarkable examples of bravery and courage of the time. By June 1944, the Nazis had incarcerated and liquidated most of the Jewish population of Europe. In the capital of Hungary, Budapest, there remained approximately 250,000 Jews still alive. Budapest was still under control of the Hungarian police force. The Nazis believed that this force was not ruthless and brutal enough to deal adequately with the complete destruction of the large remaining Jewish population of Budapest.

Ferenc Koszorús was a colonel in the Hungarian Army in charge of the First Magyar Armoured Division stationed in and around Budapest. He learned that László Baky, Secretary of State and director of all security forces, with the exception of the army, had planned a coup d'état to install a police force [government] completely subservient to the Nazis. They would see to it that Hungary was purged of all remaining Jews.

With the help of the Gestapo, Baky formed several battalions of "gendarmerie" forces loyal to him. Orders from the Regent to disband the gendarmerie went unheeded. Colonel Koszorús controlled the last remaining active army unit in Hungary. At a time when few others would stand up to the Nazi occupation, Colonel Koszorús took the initiative to resist.

Realizing the severity of the situation, Colonel Koszorús consulted with the Regent and began preparations on his own to stop Baky and the gendarmerie battalions. On July 5, 1944 at 11:30 p.m., Colonel Koszorús ordered the units of the 1st Armoured Division to take up positions at strategic points in Budapest, sealing off all roads leading into the city. By 7:00 a.m. on July 6, 1944 all the units were in place and Colonel Koszorús informed Baky that if his gendarmerie did not leave and disband they would be destroyed. On July 7, 1944 Baky capitulated and evacuated his forces.

Colonel Koszorús' unparalleled action was the only case known in which an Axis power used military force for the purpose of preventing the deportation of the Jews. As a result of his extraordinarily brave efforts, taken at great risk in an extremely volatile situation, the eventual takeover of Budapest by the Nazis was delayed by 3 1/2 months. This hiatus allowed thousands of Jews to seek safety in Budapest, thus sparing them from certain execution. It also permitted the famous Raoul Wallenberg, who arrived in Budapest on July 9, 1944, to coordinate his successful and effective rescue mission.

In October 1944, after the Germans had taken Budapest, Colonel Koszorús was forced into hiding to avoid certain execution by the Gestapo. While alive, Colonel Koszorús never received recognition of his actions. In 1991, Ferenc Koszorús was posthumously promoted to the rank of general by the Hungarian Government. His memory is honoured with a plaque placed in the famous Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest.

Therefore it is with great honour and pride that I rise today in recognition of the valiant, patriotic efforts of Ferenc Koszorús. Many thousands of families are alive today as a result of the heroic actions of one man who stood up for his beliefs in a very uncertain and dangerous time. His loyalty to his country and love of humanity are an inspiration to all who struggle against oppression and the vile bigotry of racism.

Too often the efforts of those who struggled against the Nazi oppression go unrecognized. This year, the 50th anniversary of Hungarian holocaust, the world reflects on the lessons learned. I am proud to honour Colonel Koszorús, a patriot, a humanitarian, and a hero.