

Ákos György BÁLINT, born on July 25, 1923 in Budapest. Jurist, poet, author of several books, editor of the "Newspaper for Lawyers" for 35 years, lifelong member of the Chamber of Lawyers.

Tape 1: March 16, 2016

His father was a prominent lawyer. He attended a private Catholic high school, St. Stephen, which he highly praised for its "free spirit" and emphasis on individual learning. Especially liked Italian, which he learned well, and the humanities. The years in this high school were the foundation for his later career and many friendships. Wanted to be a writer, but went to law school, where he also had brilliant professors.

Published two books of poetry in 1940 and 1943, and two book of prose in 2012 and 2013. At the time of this interview, the publication of another book about 1944 and 1945 was imminent; for that reason he touched upon, but did not discuss persons and events of that period.

He talked extensively about his maternal uncle, Jenő Lévai, the well-known journalist and first Holocaust historian. Right after the war, he collected a huge amount of documents, interviews, and wrote numerous books on the deportation, which were published in Hungary and abroad as well. He and Lévai talked every night between 10-11. Lévai's wife, aunt Bella supported his literary ambitions.

Tape 2: August 22, 2016

After the publication of his book [A Duna bal partján/On the Left Bank of the Danube-title not mentioned in the interview], Bálint talks about his experiences in 1944-45. By March 16, 1944 he sensed that something bad was coming. Hitler's invitation to Horthy to Klessheim increased his misgivings. On March 19, in the morning, their neighbor in Népszínház u.31, a prominent socialist, Julia Török, told him that the Germans had occupied Budapest. The next day he went to the university, where one professor, Gyula Mór, held a veiled anti-German lecture. He had no bad experiences at the university, but began his studies under [Prime Minister Gyula] Kállay [1942-44] when the political atmosphere and treatment of Jews were much better than in 1940-41. There were no Jews among his professors, but no anti-Semites either, and the right-wing student organizations were not active at the law faculty at the time.

On March 22, a German sergeant and a Hungarian policeman came to arrest his father, and took him as well. On a truck, they and other people were taken to Rökk Szilárd u., to the building of the former rabbinical college, which the Gestapo took over as a temporary collection camp of hostages; about 200 people, most of them prominent Jews, among them 80 lawyers, writers, scientists, and some Jewish aristocrats. [SS Captain Dieter] Wisliceny told them that they were hostages, and if Germans were attacked in Budapest they would be executed. Wisliceny received the names of lawyers from the right-wing National Association of Hungarian Lawyers. Names of fellow hostages: Otto Büchler, Gyula Kallós (not Jewish), Jenő Szatmáry, Aschner, Bertold Goldberger. After "horrible weeks," in early April, they were transferred to [the internment camp] Kistarcsa. The hostages were in Building "B," the Gestapo across

from them, in Building “A.” Initially, they were not allowed to leave the building at all, but within a short time, the commander of the camp, [Police Inspector István] Vasdényei managed to get the Gestapo removed. From then on, only four Hungarian policeman guarded them and they had free movement within the camp. They received mail, newspaper and food, practiced their religion, walked, and talked to other prisoners in the camp. Kistarcsa held more than a thousand Jews, but the hostages were the elite prisoners, who did not mingle much with the others. Sick people received medical treatment. Everybody tried to keep as a secret how humanely Vasdényei ruled the camp. Bálint described how Vasdényei temporarily prevented the deportation of Jewish prisoners in July by contacting Horthy through an intermediary, but two days later, Eichmann’s commando carried out the deportation. This happened after Horthy had stopped deportations.

On September 27, the camp in Kistarcsa, which provided safety for them, was shut down under the new Prime Minister, Géza Lakatos, who, next to Vasdényei is another central figure in Bálint’s book.

Bálint went home. His building became a Yellow Star house, because the majority of inhabitants were Jews. He found several families, together with his own, in their apartment, but until October 15, the Arrow Cross takeover, they had relative freedom of movement. He does not even remember wearing the Yellow Star.

Around October 20, he and all males in the building were taken to forced labor. Arrow Cross men and policemen took them first to the Trotting Course, next the East Railway station, then to Ferihegy Airport, Gyál farmstead, Budafok, and then back to Budapest, to Ó Street. He was very much afraid of the Arrow Cross. He thought they were worse than the Germans, because they “made a sport of terrorizing people;” they were young, stole everything that they could, the “rabble of society.” He was not beaten up, but other people were. During the forced labor they did not do any real work, but did not get food, and had to march. He knew that he should not fall behind during the march. Initially, he was together with his father and his uncle Lévai, but the two were soon released. In the Ó Street, the forced laborers were not guarded, no one cared about them and there was no food.

Some time in November he left and found his family in a protected house in Pozsonyi Street 15, on the second floor. His family, including Lévai and his wife, and he himself had Swedish *Schutzpasses* with Wallenberg’s signature. A neighbor, Lipót Nemes acquired the *Schutzpasses* for them while he and his father were in Kistarcsa. They lived with other families in the same apartment. They were taken for work twice, but otherwise he did not leave the apartment. He read Steinbeck with the help of a dictionary and learned Russian from a book he found in the apartment. They did not really have food. Once, a former client of his father, called Véghelyi brought two chickens for them, which was a memorable event – his eyes still welled up talking about it.

He thought of two people as their saviors: Wallenberg and [Giorgio] Perlasca. Never met them, but read Perlasca’s diary, which came into Lévai’s possession after the war, and suggested to Lévai to publish the diary. Perlasca is the third central figure of his book.

He heard that the Arrow Cross took people from Yellow Star and protected houses to the Danube where they were shot. Nothing happened to him and his family.

He mainly remembers good people and the good things he encountered, a positive attitude with which he viewed events in 1944 too. He thinks that is the reason that he survived unscathed.

On January 15, 1945 Russians appeared in his building. They looked for Germans, but took his grandfather's watch, which he found disappointing.

He and an old friend, József Lantosi worked for a nearby Russian unit as photographers. The Russian treated them well and gave them food.

He attended Sztójay's and Szálasi's People's Court Trials after the war.

As a student of law, he was very impressed by the chief judge Béla Pálosi who sought the truth in a trial, where the death penalty was a foregone conclusion as Sztójay was a German Quisling. In this trial he also heard the cross examination of Lakatos and [former Plenipotentiary of the German Reich, Edmund] Veesenmayer as witnesses.

In the Szálasi trial, he was mainly interested in László Endre, who, together with László Baky, [as state secretaries in the Ministry of Internal Affairs] implemented the deportations and thus they became mass murderers.

He witnessed two executions: [Prime Minister Béla] Imrédy's, and Szálasi's.

He thought that Imrédy, Endre, Baky, and [former Minister of Culture] Bálint Hóman were the politicians who bore the main responsibility for the persecution of the Jews. All his life Bálint focused on the question of how these and other well-educated and highly intelligent people became villains and ended on the wrong side of history.