

Documents

László Moholy-Nagy and Hungarian-American Politics II

Introduced, edited, and translated (where necessary) by

Oliver A. I. Botar

In the Spring, 1988 issue of the *Hungarian Studies Review*, we published a set of documents and an interview on Moholy-Nagy's political activities in the context of Hungarian-American politics during and immediately after the Second World War, and how these affected his attempts at becoming a naturalized American citizen.¹ These documents demonstrated Moholy-Nagy's concern for his homeland during one of the greatest crises in its history, and showed his attempts to distance himself from his Leftist affiliations when applying for American citizenship.

Based on information which has come to light since 1988, we would like to place the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy (HACD) into its broader context of Hungarian-American political history, and then, based on interviews with and documents provided by George and Barbara Striker, we wish to supplement and correct the information provided by Zita Schwarcz on Moholy-Nagy's role in the HACD. We would also like to deal briefly with Moholy's role in the Hungarians for Roosevelt Committee. Finally, we will publish Moholy-Nagy's correspondence with the U.S. Immigration authorities concerning his attempts to secure American citizenship.

According to a 1942 confidential report of the Foreign Nationalities Branch in the Office of Strategic Services of the American government, the Hungarian American Council for Democracy was a spin-off of the American Federation of Democratic Hungarians (AFDH), and the related New Democratic Hungary (NDH) group, founded in New York in 1942.² Though some members of the AFDH had been "insistently advocating the admission to [the United States] of Count Michael Karolyi," a group of Chicago Hungarians, including Moholy-Nagy, Dr. Alex Vince and Dr. Hugo Rony (not Tibor Ronyi, as reported in the 1988 publication)³ quit the Federation on the grounds that it had "not supported Karolyi with sufficient energy. These Chicagoans [then] engaged in

gathering ten thousand signatures which they plan[ned] to present to the Department of State to bolster their plea that Karolyi be granted a visa."⁴ While Károlyi did not end up coming to the United States, by 1943 the Chicagoans had founded the HACD, with the Count as its honorary president, and the Hungarian-American actor Béla Lugosi as its regular president.⁵ This was the organization, the leadership of whose important Chicago Chapter Moholy-Nagy took on.

Of the other active members of the HACD, as Zita Schwarcz has said, George and Barbara Striker were the most important. Some of the gaps and inaccuracies of the introduction to the 1988 publication in the *Hungarian Studies Review* can now be filled in on the basis of two interviews with George and Barbara Striker.⁶ A first cousin of the Nobel Prize winning Toronto chemist John Polanyi, György (George) Otto Striker was born in Vienna in 1913, and grew up in Budapest, where he died in 1992. George was an electronic physicist, and Barbara a chemist. They emigrated to the United States in 1938, where George worked for the Zenith Corporation, and Barbara for Lady Esther Cosmetics and later Revere Copper and Bronze. George Striker became involved with Hungarian-American politics during the war, at which time he brought his Leftist convictions and patriotism to bear on his activities. They returned to Hungary at the invitation of the Orion Radio company of Budapest in 1948, and no doubt their Communist sympathies aided them in making this choice which, despite George Striker's political troubles during the early 1950s, they seem not to have regretted.

The Strikers made the following remarks concerning the interview with Zita Schwarcz: Barbara Striker feels that the HACD did not support Károlyi to the extent suggested by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy in her husband's biography.⁷ According to the Strikers, in her interview, Zita Schwarcz conflated two different banquets. The banquet Schwarcz most exactly described was that held on February 2, 1947, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the declaration of the Hungarian Republic.⁸ Ruzstem Vámbéry had been invited in his capacity as Hungary's ambassador to the United States, but he could not attend, so Iván Nagy, First Secretary of the Hungarian Embassy in Washington was sent in his stead. Moholy-Nagy's carpenter friend, who also took part in the HACD, was Kálmán Tomanicka (or Tomaniczka; both spellings are used, but not "Tomolicka", as Zita Schwarcz remembered it). The name was usually shortened to Kalman Toman, as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy reported in her biography of her husband.⁹ Tomanicka's wife Katica was also, as were the Strikers and Schwarcz, involved with the broadly-based "American Hungarian Relief" organization, which tried to aid Hungarians in the hardships experienced during the post-war era. Another member of both the AHR and HACD was Béla Ruhig,¹⁰ wrongly spelled "Ruik" in the interview with Zita Schwarcz. László Moholy-Nagy himself, while not active in the AHR, donated the then generous sum of \$50 to its operations.¹¹ He sent the following note with his donation to the AHR: (See Fig. 1) "My Hungarian brothers and sisters, I am with you, I feel with you — continue the big job

with enthusiasm, tirelessly, to aid those suffering in the homeland. I attach a cheque for \$50 — a little drop in a big ocean."

The other banquet, which, according to the Strikers, Schwarcz conflated with the 1947 one, was the memorial banquet for Moholy-Nagy, held on December 2, 1946 in the Walnut Room of the Midland Hotel on West Adams Street in Chicago. As the program shows, it was at this banquet that György Kepes may have recited the poetry of Sándor Petőfi and Endre Ady.¹² The Strikers dispute Zita Schwarcz's memory that Moholy-Nagy would have resigned from the HACD, but Schwarcz's view is supported by Moholy-Nagy's own letter to Assistant Secretary of State William Benton of February 14, 1946, published in full in the 1988 selection of documents in the *HSR*,¹³ and by Moholy-Nagy's letter of January 17, 1946 to Garrott R. Foley, in which he states: "When Hungary had been liberated and Count Karolyi had been asked by the Russian Government to return to Hungary, I saw my mission fulfilled and I resigned from the Hungarian Democratic Council on May 23, 1945." (See the full text of the letter below.)

Despite his statement to the contrary in the Foley letter, however, Moholy-Nagy's political activism extended beyond his involvement in the HACD. Towards the end of the war, during the fall of 1944, with presidential elections looming, the Leftist and liberal segments of the American Hungarian community organized to aid in the re-election of the president. A "Hungarians for Roosevelt Committee" was formed in Los Angeles, and Moholy-Nagy took on the Chairmanship of its Illinois (or Chicago) chapter, the "American-Hungarian Roosevelt Committee." How strongly Moholy-Nagy felt about the importance of Roosevelt's re-election is evident in the passionate text (republished below) he wrote on the subject, which was published in the *Magyarok Rooseveltért* [Hungarians for Roosevelt] brochure, edited by Mathew Torok and published by the "Hungarians for Roosevelt Committee" in Los Angeles.¹⁴ This booklet contains texts supporting Roosevelt by a selection of prominent American-Hungarians including Moholy-Nagy, the screenwriter and dramatist Melchior (Menyhért) Lengyel, Ruzstem Vámbéry, artists Henrik Major and Marcel Vertès, actor Béla Lugosi and director Michael Curtiz. After his successful re-election, the unexpected death of Roosevelt on April 12, 1945 must have come as a blow to the members of the Chicago chapter of the AHRC, and a year after this, on April 12, 1946, they organized a first anniversary memorial celebration for Roosevelt at the Midland Hotel in Chicago, where the memorial celebration for Moholy-Nagy himself would later take place.¹⁵ Shortly before Roosevelt's death, on March 11, 1945, Moholy-Nagy also took it upon himself to be the keynote speaker at a (politically) broadly-based celebration of the 1848 Hungarian War of Independence.¹⁶

In the 1988 Spring issue of the *Hungarian Studies Review*, we reported the "Moholy Nagy László Segélyalap" [László Moholy-Nagy Aid Fund] referred to in the advertisement for the memorial service held for Moholy-Nagy on 27 November, 1946 as having been published in the Newsletter of the Chicago

Chapter of the HACD of 25 November 1946.¹⁷ But the single-page flyer on which this advertisement was printed, is in fact not a copy of an HACD Newsletter (the only issue of which appeared September 3, 1945),¹⁸ though it was published by the HACD. The László Moholy-Nagy Aid Fund remains something of a mystery, for the Strikers do not remember administering such a fund, though they do remember that the fund "to the aid of orphans in Hungary" (the alternative charity mourners of Moholy-Nagy were asked to donate to in the flyer), was begun by then Hungarian Prime Minister Zoltán Tildy, and run by Mrs. Tildy. The Strikers think it possible that the László Moholy-Nagy Aid Fund was organized by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy or Moholy-Nagy's artist friends in Chicago, to aid destitute Hungarian artists. To date, however, no documents concerning such a fund have come to light among Sibyl's papers.¹⁹

In the Spring 1988 special issue of the *Hungarian Studies Review*, we published the correspondence between Moholy-Nagy and Assistant Secretary of State William Benton, concerning Moholy-Nagy's attempts at becoming an American citizen. Since that time, the correspondence which preceded this of 1945 and January 1946 has come to light, and we publish this material here for the first time. While repeating some elements of the letter to Benton, these letters do offer us new information on Moholy-Nagy's work, his struggle to gain American citizenship, and his attempt to de-emphasize his past political affiliations. His efforts finally did meet with success, and he received his "Certificate of Naturalization" on April 10, 1946, after what seems to have been William Benton's intervention.²⁰

NOTES

¹Oliver Botar, ed., "Documents on László Moholy-Nagy," *Hungarian Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 77-87.

²Author unknown, "Memorandum: Hungarian Politics in the United States" (1942), pp. 96-100 in Nandor F. Dreisziger with Andrew Ludanyi, eds., *Hungarian Studies Review*, Special Issue: "Oscar Jaszi: Visionary, Reformer, and Political Activist" (17, nos. 1-2, Spring-Fall 1991).

³Botar, ed., "Documents...", p. 80. In "Memorandum: Hungarian Politics..." his name is spelled "Hugo Roni," p. 99, and according to the American Medical Association's Chicago Office, he was known as Hugo R. Rony. (The latter information is courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy.)

⁴"Memorandum: Hungarian Politics...", p. 99.

⁵Botar, ed., "Documents...", p. 79. See also "Deklaráció a Magyar Amerikai Demokratikus Tanács politikai irányelveiről" (Chicago, 1943 June 17), item 2 on the list of the Striker Donation to the former Párttörténeti Intézet [Institute of Party History], Budapest, prepared by George and Barbara Striker, November 5, 1986. Xerox courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy. This material was formerly in the Striker donation of the Párttörténeti Intézet, inv. No. 687 f. 17 b.

⁶One of the interviews was carried out by Hattula Moholy-Nagy, the artist's daughter, on July 2, 1989, and the other by Oliver Botar on January 28, 1990, both in the Strikers' Budapest home, in the presence of Levente Nagy, the artist's nephew. George Striker has since passed away.

⁷Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, Second Edition (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1969), 237-239. The indications of the documents available to us (e.g. the letter of Moholy-Nagy to Garrott R. Foley published below, and the "Memorandum: Hungarian Politics...") support Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's claim, however.

⁸"Az A.M.D.T. chicágoi csop. felhívásai a Magyar Köztársaság egy éves évfordulójára (Népünnepély és bankett, 1947 feb. 2)", item 26 on the list of the Striker donation to the Párttörténeti Intézet.

⁹Botar, ed. "Documents..." p. 79, note 2 and p. 80. Also Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment...*, 237-239.

¹⁰On the AHR, letterhead of the AHR, from the collection of George and Barbara Striker, provided courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy.

¹¹Letter from László Moholy-Nagy to the AHR, October 18, 1945. In Hungarian. George Striker material in the archives of the Hungarian National Gallery, Inv. no. 21, 328/1981.

¹²Flyer published by the Chicago Chapter of the HACD. From the George Striker collection, courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy.

¹³"As soon as the war ended I terminated my connections with the Democratic American-Hungarian Council. (sic)" Botar, ed., "Documents..." p. 82.

¹⁴It is undated, but presumably from sometime before the November 7, 1944 elections and after the one dated letter of support published in the brochure, that of Louis Weinstock of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, of September 11, 1944. (Courtesy of Levente Nagy and Hattula Moholy-Nagy)

¹⁵Invitation to the event, courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy. Another related document, the "Kiáltvány Chicágo és Környéke Magyarorsághoz!" [Manifesto to the Hungarians of Chicago and its Environs!], an undated flyer of the Illinois Chapter of the AHRC, was provided courtesy of Zita Schwarcz. This flyer was mistakenly dated to 1946 on p. 79, note 4 of Botar, "Documents..." It can now be established that it is from 1944.

¹⁶"Közös márciusi szabadságünnep, műsoros est 1945 III.11.-én, főszónok: Moholy-Nagy László", item 6 on the list of the Striker donation to the Párttörténeti Intézet.

¹⁷Botar, ed., "Documents..." pp. 78, 83.

¹⁸According to George and Barbara Striker.

¹⁹Information from Hattula Moholy-Nagy.

²⁰Certificate of Naturalization no. 6309540, in the possession of Hattula Moholy-Nagy. See the telegram William Benton sent to Moholy-Nagy on April 20, 1946 wherein he writes: "If I've been of small help — I'm most happy." (Botar, ed., "Documents...", p. 83.

Documents:

a. From the brochure *Magyarok Rooseveltért* [Hungarians for Roosevelt] Mathew Torok, editor. (Los Angeles: Hungarians for Roosevelt Committee, n.d. [1944]) (Original in Hungarian)

Why Every Hungarian-American Should Vote for Roosevelt

The Opinions of Well-Known Hungarians.

The two thousand miles of ocean which separates America from Europe has in many respects acted as a barrier to the mutual understanding of the two continents. Roosevelt has demonstrated a deep and thorough comprehension of the European events. At a time when "isolationism" was not a dirty word, but the prevalent attitude, it took bravery on Roosevelt's part to openly oppose all forms and manifestations of dictatorship, and to warn the American people, that it will be exposed to attack, and that it may even loose in such a struggle, if it does not prepare itself.

When the war happened, his behaviour was characterized by an impulse to gather together, in his government, or as advisors, the most talented men. Among his workmates there were Christians as well as Jews, those born abroad, just as much as there were New England aristocrats. His complete lack of prejudice made him the friend of all true democrats, and it reduced the danger of a sterile fixation on tradition in the public service.

As in any occupation, in politics also, practice makes perfect. One has only to listen to one of Roosevelt's speeches to understand the extent to which his many years of public service have sharpened his psychological understanding of the masses and his ability to comprehend the complex behaviours of the representatives of foreign governments. Following victory in the war, America will become the centre of world reconstruction, even if only because of the sheer forces of circumstance. As we well know, economic power lends power to the political system as well, and so America will become a crucial factor in the bulk of political decision making.

It would not be wise to assign such a decisive voice at the upcoming conferences to a person who has little or no international experience. Stalin, Churchill and Chiang K'ai-Shek are not new men in world politics, and we must appoint a person on a level equal to theirs.

Roosevelt is far-sighted, wise and brave. Roosevelt is the choice of the people.

László Moholy-Nagy / architect, chairman of the Chicagoan American Hungarian Roosevelt Committee (*sic*)

b. (Joseph Edelman of Abbell Edelman Portes and Abbell, Attorneys and Counsellors, Chicago to László Moholy-Nagy)

March 23, 1945

Mr. László Moholy-Nagy
2622 Lake View Avenue
Chicago 14, Illinois

Dear Mr. Moholy-Nagy:

Since your telephone communication of last week I have conferred with several members of the staff of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. I was informed, after considerable insistence, that your matter is still under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, commonly referred to as the F.B.I. The Naturalization Service is not permitted to invade the territory of the F.B.I., nor, for that matter, is it permitted to inform any one that an investigation is in process there. Moreover, they have no jurisdiction to urge the F.B.I. that the investigation be expedited. These details were conveyed to me by the several men with whom I spoke.

I expressed some irritation at the unfairness of the procedure, and indicated that your record and background were certainly beyond reproach. Moreover, I pointed out that to my knowledge a considerable number of aliens of Hungarian nationality had secured naturalization certificates, in periods varying from six months to a year and a half, and that the delay in your case was inexcusable since your pro-democratic support of our country and the tenets of our Constitution is unquestionable.

I was assured that despite the reluctance of the Department, the F.B.I. would be contacted at once and urged to complete their investigation. I shall hold in abeyance any further contact with them until April 15th, at which time I hope that some report will be forthcoming. Meanwhile, I can assure you that everything is being done to bring the matter to a proper conclusion.

With all kind wishes, I am

Yours very sincerely,

Joseph Edelman

JE:DS

c. (László Moholy-Nagy to Andrew Jordan)

November 12, 1945

Mr. Andrew Jordan
District Director
U.S. Department of Justice
Immigration and Naturalization Service
Post Office Building
Chicago 7, Illinois

Re: 730-P-271929
730-P278661

Dear Sir:

On July 27 of this year I was granted a hearing concerning my petition for naturalization. On September 11 you informed Mrs. Emily Taft-Douglas, Congresswoman from Illinois, that an investigation of my support of the Hungarian Democratic Council was still pending. This was two months ago. Altogether my application has now been pending for three and one half years, and my residency in the United States is going into its ninth year.

In this period I have established myself as a painter and designer and I have built up an art school, Institute of Design, a non-profit corporation, at 1009 North State Street, Chicago which has attracted and trained more than 2000 students. Large numbers of returning veterans have enrolled this fall, and we have been found worthy of the support of the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations. The Board of Directors, listed on the back cover of the enclosed catalogue, comprises top-ranking names of American Commerce and Industry.

I have worked as art advisor and designer for firms like Spiegel Inc., United States Gypsum, and the Parker Pen Company. During these years I was asked by most of the important colleges and universities to lecture and contribute to their publications. This winter two books of mine on arts and education: "The New Vision" and "Vision in Motion" will be published.

All in all I tried to do my best as a loyal and useful citizen, and I feel most bewildered and deeply hurt by the treatment meted out to me by the Immigration and Naturalization service. From time to time I have heard wild rumors of slanderous accusations brought against me, but not once was I give a chance to answer them as a man. The hearing granted me in July was a quick-fire succession of questions concerning the past and present history of Hungary of which I have no detailed knowledge since I left that country twenty-five years ago. It is my deep conviction that what I did for the Hungarian Democratic Council (*sic*) was in the interest of the Allied cause for the

shortening of the war. But this was treated ironically by the investigator. I was given to understand that my support of a democratic movement in Hungary was either too naive or too subversive to be credible. I may tell you, Sir, that I left this hearing deeply depressed, and with a feeling of frustration about the apparent inability of a civil servant to understand the motives of an artist and educator for freedom, democracy and peace.

After running around in a circle I feel that the only thing to do now is to have a meeting with you as head of the Chicago office and to clarify the whole matter in a personal talk. I am looking forward to a communication when I can see you.

Yours very truly,

L. Moholy-Nagy

mn/sp

1 encl.

cc Mrs. Emily Taft-Douglas

d. (László Moholy-Nagy to Emily Taft-Douglas)

November 12, 1945

The Hon. Mrs. Emily-Taft-Douglas (sic)
House of Representatives
Washington D.C.

Dear Mrs. Douglas:

It is not easy for me to bother you again with our naturalization procedures. I only do it because I feel that my work as an educator, and the steadily rising number of students in the Institute of Design make it imperative that I be given the legal and moral protection of citizenship.

In an attempt to break the deadlock I have sent today a letter to Mr. Andrew Jordan, District Director of the immigration and naturalization service in Chicago, of which I am enclosing a copy. There is not much I can add to this letter except that the rumors I am referring to are wild stories about me driving an armored train during the Bela Kuhn uprising (sic), throwing bombs at non-communist Hungarians. This of course is most ridiculous. I took no part whatsoever in the Hungarian revolution, and I have never been a member of any political party.

My very dear friend, Walter Gropius, now Chairman of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, encountered a similar delay, founded on some similarly gross misstatements concerning his political connections. In this case it was possible for a Senator from Massachusetts to get to the root of the trouble and to straighten out things.

I do not know whether a similar procedure would be possible in my case, and I do not want to take any steps without being advised by you. I have to get from under this absurd cloud, and feel myself a citizen, free to do his chosen task to the best of his abilities.

If your work is too heavy to permit an additional burden, please let me know. But if there are any further steps you can suggest, or persons you may be able to interest in my "case" which would lead to a quick liquidation I would be most grateful.

With kindest regards, yours very sincerely

László Moholy-Nagy

e. (László Moholy-Nagy to Garrott R. Foley)

January 17, 1946

Mr. Garrott R. Foley
Foley, Alabama

Dear Mr. Foley:

Your brother Bert was kind enough to call me up a week ago to inform me that he had mentioned our difficulties with the Immigration Authorities to you, and to tell us that you had shown some interest in the case. He suggested that it might be possible for you to gain perhaps the interest of Senator Lister Hill for us, and it is with this hope that I give you a few details of this unpleasant and thoroughly puzzling affair.

In June 1937 while working as art director for Imperial Airways and other large firms in London I was asked to come to this country to head a progressive art school, founded by The association (*sic*) of Arts and Industries in Chicago. I was offered a five years (*sic*) contract and settled with my family in Chicago. After financial difficulties of the Association which led to liquidation of their school I continued with a school of my own which was incorporated as Institute of Design. Its location is 1009 North State Street, Chicago. Walter P. Paepcke, President of the Container Corporation of America is chairman of the board and the names of the directors, which you will find listed in the enclosed school catalogue are well know in American industry and commerce.

The Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations have granted us repeatedly financial help. The Veteran Administration has recognized the Institute under the so-called G.I. Bill and the Department of Public Instruction and the State Examining Board acknowledge cr[e]dit given for work in our school.

I was asked to sit on the board of the Mayor's Committee for Civilian Defense as a camouflage expert; I have lectured at most of the large universities and colleges in the United States and my articles have been published in many journals. I have been doing and still do art work for such firms as The Parker Pen Co., United States Gypsum, Spiegel Inc. and others, and I have published books, two of which: *The New Vision* and *Vision in Motion* are scheduled for the next months.

My paintings hang in many United States museums and private collections and the Cincinnati Modern Art Society of Cincinnati will open a large retrospective exhibition of my work in the Museum in February. All in all I feel I have done my best to contribute with my efforts to American art, industry and education.

On May 29, 1942 I filed my application for naturalization, and my wife filed hers 5 months later since she and the children had come a little later to the United States. Our filing numbers are:

L. Moholy-Nagy: 730P-271929

S. Moholy-Nagy 730P-2786610 (listed under Dorothy Pauline Moholy-Nagy)

I never expected any objection to my intention of becoming a citizen of a country, which, I felt, had given me such rich opportunities to serve its culture. But I was never called up to take the final oath and after long inquiries I found out that it was my membership with the Hungarian Democratic Council (*sic*) which was considered an obstacle to my naturalization.

This Hungarian Democratic Council worked for two purposes: it supported Count Michael Karolyi in London as a potential leader of a liberated and thoroughly liberalized Hungary, and it spread democratic information and better understanding of Allied war aims among the Hungarian-born population. When I was asked to become chairman of this group in Chicago I accepted in spite of my heavy commitments because I saw a chance to win my new country more loyal citizens. It never occurred to me that my intentions could be so dangerously misinterpreted. When Hungary had been liberated and Count Karolyi had been asked by the Russian Government to return to Hungary, I saw my mission fulfilled and I resigned from the Hungarian Democratic Council on May 23, 1945.

This connection with the Chicago Hungarians has been the only political affiliation I have ever had in my life, and I was most unpleasantly surprised when at a hearing on July 27, 1945 I was grilled by a young man half my age as if I were a subversive agitator.

Since then I have been once received by the judge and the district director of the local Immigration and Naturalization Service but I have been given nothing but vague

assurances that my matter would be soon decided. The names of the gentlemen in charge were Judge Lenke and District Director Jordan.

I have been in this country for almost nine years in which I have worked untiringly and unsparingly. My children grow (*sic*) up to be Americans. The present state of indecision and vague accusation is most humiliating and bewildering.

With kindest regards and an assurance of our gratitude for your attention, I am

Yours very sincerely

L. Moholy-Nagy

(The letters are published through the courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy)