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ZAGON, Josephus

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AIR

NAVA- 6/24

Chief, Foreign Division M
Chief of Station, Vienna

20 June 1951

Attention: []

Operational
Father Josephus ZAGON

The following information has been provided by []

1. Fr. ZAGON is "Visitator Apostolicus Extraordinarius," the Pope's personal representative to Hungarian Roman Catholics in exile since 1945. It is Father ZAGON's mission to recreate the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church as efficiently as possible in the countries to which Hungarians have immigrated. He is easily the first person in the Hungarian church hierarchy out of Hungary, and in May 1951 attended Otto von Habsburg's wedding at Nancy as the Hungarian Church's representative. More important than his mission of recreating the church in the lands of exile is ZAGON's other responsibility: directing the church's resistance to Communism inside Hungary. From his Austrian Headquarters at Innsbruck, ZAGON directs an organization that has courier contact with the formal church hierarchy in Hungary.

2. ZAGON was born 2 November 1909 in Angony in Komarom County in Northern Hungary. His father was a small farmer. ZAGON has five brothers, one of whom is a Benedictine monk in Brazil. ZAGON attended high school in Győr, the biggest industrial city in Western Hungary, and then graduated from the priests seminary there. Afterwards he studied at the Vienna Pannoeum, the famous religious college founded under Maria Theresia in Vienna. Then he attended the University of Vienna and in 1935 became a priest. The next year he was chaplain at Sopron and from 1936 until 1943 was secretary to the bishop in Győr. Until 1942 the bishop was HEIMER. After 1942 it was Wilmes APOR who in 1943 appointed ZAGON as director of the bishop's offices. Under the German occupation ZAGON incurred the enmity of the Nazis by permitting many Jews to take refuge in the bishop's palace and thus saving them from extermination. When the Red army liberated Győr in 1945, the Bishop permitted 600 Győr women to take refuge in the palace cellar. On Good Friday that year a pair of drunken Russians attacked two girls who had left the cellar for a breath of air. ZAGON and the bishop heard their screams and rushed to their aid. In the tussle that followed the Russians fired their machine pistols, and the bishop fell mortally wounded, dying in ZAGON's arms. ZAGON ran the Bishop's offices after that until 1946. As Communism grew stronger in Hungary and so threatened the church's existence, ZAGON came to know Cardinal Mindszenty and eventually became one of his trusted men. When I first met ZAGON

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in Salzburg in February 1949 he gave me to understand that as one of the persons involved in MINDSICHTY's resistance apparatus, he had been forced to leave the country. He had left Hungary on 6 January 1949.

3. In February 1949 I was in Salzburg collecting material for some articles on Cardinal MINDSICHTY. I was introduced to ZAGON by Stephan KOTZAK, State Department Foreign Service Officer, who until his expulsion from Hungary had been the American Legation's chief reporter on church affairs. Until the Cardinal's arrest just before Christmas, KOTZAK had been in constant contact with him and knew personally most of MINDSICHTY's chief lieutenants. KOTZAK had known ZAGON in Hungary and asked whether I would not drive ZAGON to Vienna when I returned. I did. ZAGON was dressed in tweedy civilian clothes and carried a false Austrian identity card in a different name. We became quite friendly before we reached Vienna. He pointed out to me that he was in active touch with church resistance groups inside of Hungary, and that his job now was to keep these groups in touch with Hungarian Roman Catholic centers outside the country. I deposited him in Vienna at the Pannoneum, which is one of these centers, where he was greeted by ~~Father Gyergy~~ ^{Father ABRAH} ABRAH was then, and still is, one of ZAGON's top men. Currently he is working with ZAGON in Munich.

4. Two months ago I became interested in the fact that the Pope had appointed a representative to exiled Hungarians and prepared to write a magazine story about it. Through my Hungarian assistant in Salzburg, Robert HALMI about whom see subsequent reports, I arranged a meeting with ZAGON. When I was shown ZAGON's picture, I recognized my friend whom I had driven to Vienna. Approximately a month ago in Salzburg I met ZAGON again, with HALMI, and learned about his work and his organization.

5. ZAGON told me that in the entire history of the church there has never been such an appointment as his, that even his title, "Visitator Apostolicus Extraordinarius" or "Extraordinary Visitor of the Apostle," is new. The appointment arises from the fact that never before in Catholic history have so many Catholics been away from their home church. ZAGON's flock includes those Hungarians all over the world who since 1945 have fled Communism. In America Cardinal Spellman is responsible for the old Hungarian immigrants, ZAGON for the new, post-1945 ones. ZAGON presides over Caritas, the Hungarian Roman Catholic welfare organization that is 85 per cent financed by the American National Catholic Welfare Conference. The importance of Caritas, so far as new Hungarian emigrants are concerned, in Austria cannot be overestimated. Hungarian Catholics know they will get food, shelter, medical care, and sympathy at Caritas stations and so report there first when they cross the Curtain. Caritas is thus the freshest intelligence source and provides a complete register on the lower levels of who leaves Hungary from day to day. These Caritas stations are also involved in ZAGON's methods of getting information in and out of Hungary. Later I will elaborate on the Salzburg Caritas office with which I am in direct contact.

6. Here is ZAGON's order of battle. He is responsible for 200,000 Catholic souls outside the Curtain. About half these are in Europe; Brazil has 50,000 more; Argentina has 25,000; the United States, Venezuela, Chile, Canada together, 15,000; and Austria, 12,000. To minister to these Hungarians ZAGON has a total of 800 priests. Half of them are worldly priests in parishes. The other half are clerical priests in various orders. In addition, ZAGON has 60 theology students in

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Europe, or so-called "small priests." Where his priests are distributed portends the strength of his organization. Of his 119 priests in Europe, 42 are in Austria, 24 in Germany, and the rest scattered. Outside of Europe, KASOV has 8 priests in Australia, 6 in Brazil, 4 in Argentina and one each in Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, San Domingo, with around 80, including monks, in the United States.

7. The 60 theology students are scattered in Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Rome, Paris, Lille, and Augsburg. They are important because they provide the church hierarchy with fresh blood. KASOV pays the students at least \$200 a year towards living costs and sometimes gives more. All of the students are Hungarians escaped from Hungary. When they are ordained, they come to KASOV and say, "I am a priest, and I am now working for you." KASOV then dispatches them to the most strategic areas. One of these currently is Australia, where authorities are resisting the organization of Hungarian refugees into old world communal units.

8. By far the most interesting of the priests in the orders are the Jesuits. The Jesuits have always been given credit for taking a longer view than other church orders, and the Jesuit experience in Hungary proves this is still so. KASOV told me the Jesuits have brought every one of their members, including the novices, from out of the Iron Curtain countries. In other words, there are no longer any Jesuits behind the Curtain. Over half of the 100 clerical priests are Jesuits. Their biggest center is in the village of Ghisri near Turin, Italy, where 65 Hungarian Jesuit students are studying with their Hungarian teachers, all of them having been brought out of Hungary. The Hungarian Jesuits were brought out on the Orient Express. The escape plan was conceived and executed by a former Jesuit who was a railroad switchman near the Hungarian border crossing point. He built a box car that was attached beneath one of the Orient passenger cars. The box held two people, and each trip the Orient carried two Jesuits out, until none was left in Hungary.

9. KASOV, who was appointed to his position in September 1950, told me: "The resistance of the church in Hungary hasn't diminished one iota since November. The churches were never so full, and the resistance of the souls of the priests is stronger than ever."

10. KASOV is a tall, handsome man with even features and almost white hair, despite his early middle age. He is solidly built and gives an impression of great poise, charm, and intelligence. He has about him in fact none of the solemn, detached air that priests usually affect. His manner instead is of a man who enjoys public life. KASOV speaks no English, but his German and French are excellent.

11. His job calls for the qualities of a diplomat, and KASOV has them. He pointed out to me that the American bishops like to remove his freshly immigrated priests and replace them with reliable Irish ones. KASOV's problem is to keep his flocks attended by fresh Hungarian-speaking priests, and it isn't easy.

12. KASOV also gives the impression of being an excellent organizer, and fully aware of his enormous responsibility in Hungary. KASOV and I are on easy terms, and he addresses me by my first name. He also confides in me the details of his organization to an unusual degree. However, this should not be construed to mean that KASOV is loose-mouthed. I was introduced to him by KOTYAK, the State

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Department Officer whom NIEDSENYI trusted absolutely and whom ZAGON trusts likewise. My later liaison with ZAGON has been through HALMI, whom ZAGON also esteems.

13. Regarding ZAGON's capabilities as a diplomat, I should also mention that he cautioned me about writing a magazine article about him. There were many ambitious men in the Vatican who resented his personal influence with the Pope and the power that he, ZAGON, enjoyed. These men might resent undue publicity given a former priest, and in the end might make his work more difficult--which he wished to avoid.

14. ZAGON's home base is Rome, but he regularly travels a circuit which includes Innsbruck, Munich, Augsburg, Lille, Paris, and Milan. His Austrian Headquarters is at Innsbruck, where he supervises a Hungarian church school and operates an office directed by (Father) Joseph VANSKI, a former Jesuit about whom I will report subsequently. ZAGON's Vienna liaison is with the Pamotium, where he once studied and which is now the leading Hungarian church institution in Vienna. Because of its proximity to the frontier and its high place in the church hierarchy, the Pamotium is of first importance. I do not know but I believe that ZAGON's couriers to and from Hungary report directly there. The most active person at the Pamotium was Father AMI until his departure last winter for Munich, where he now works for ZAGON. The most active person now is Menseigneur Dr. Giuseppe BON whom I do not know but whom I will meet shortly since ZAGON has given me an introductory card to him explaining I am an American who can be trusted.

15. ZAGON also supervises a Hungarian church school at Lins, but probably his most important station in Austria is the Caritas office at Ignaz Harnochstrasse 2 in Salzburg. This office is a former NF barrack divided into several parts: a dormitory where around 30 freshly arrived immigrants--men, women, and children--live, a small dispensary where they get medical care, an office, and a tiny room between the dormitory and the office which contains a small, new printing press. The presence of the printing press is naturally a secret. I do not think it has been used up to now. It is obviously intended for the printing of church newsletters and hand bills to be smuggled into Hungary.

16. ZAGON's relations with the French in Salzburg are not entirely clear to me. HALMI and SHAYMANY tell me that the Caritas organization in Vienna is in close daily touch with the French but that the ZAGON's Headquarters in Innsbruck is independent of them. ZAGON himself is pro-American in a way that only a Hungarian can be.

17. ZAGON comes from that branch of the Roman Catholic church which, like Cardinal NIEDSENYI, has unlimited belief in American good will, power, and efficiency. I do not have exact information on ZAGON's liaison, if any, with the French. I have been given to understand by HALMI and SHAYMANY, who knew something of his organization, that this liaison is only formal and not reciprocal. I would like to defer judgment on possible future methods of approach towards ZAGON until further meetings with him. I expect to see him in late June or early July in Salzburg.

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