

NO. 459

"B-1" INTERVIEW FACESHEET AND RATING

Copy No. 10  
PEZ p.1.

Summer, 1957  
Vienna

1. V-35
2. [REDACTED]
3. Vienna, Austria
4. 1908
5. M
6. Hungarian
7. None
8. ?
9. M
10. Two
11. Chief of Section, Ministry of Food
12. Trade union organizer
13. Proletarian (working class)
14. Upper level bureaucrat
15. Yes, U.S. Army Sgt. 1942-1945
16. England, Denmark, Czechoslovakia (1955-56)
17. No
18. No
19. 4 years of secondary education
20. Budapest
21. Budapest
22. Capital
23. Communist
24. November 23, 1956
25. Vienna, Austria
26. U.S.
27. No
28. No
29. --

[REDACTED] evaded deportation from the U.S. by leaving "voluntarily" in 1949 in response to an invitation from Rakosi. He was a long time member of the U.S. Communist Party, playing an active role primarily as a trade union organizer. Deportation orders against him prevent his re-entry in the U.S.

31. "7" Variable rapport
32. "7" Variable veracity dependent on content of topic
33. "9"
34. Very much

Respondent interested in establishing rapport re his immigration case and obviously felt CURPH could do something for him if it only wanted to. This colored his remarks and his own attitudes on socialism at present and on extent of his political involvement with communism.

John Szántó

49 year old Hungarian Communist.

Mr. Szanto began the discussion with a plea<sup>s</sup> for assistance <sup>in</sup> ~~to~~ his own complicated personal case which involves his inability to obtain permission to re-enter the United States although his wife and two children are there now. In order to appreciate his predicament, to judge his merits, and assess his potential as a useful contributor to the project, Mr. Szántó volunteered a resumé of his life.

He was born in Temesvár (Transylvania) in 1908 of working class parents. His father died shortly after the war as a result of wounds received in the war and from the age of 13 he substantially supported his family consisting of mother, sister, and brother. He nevertheless managed to finish 4 years of high school and then worked in a shop. He became interested in trade union work and when a buddy of his was selected to be general secretary of the food workers' union of Rumania, he went along as administrative assistant. The union, he claims, was free of Communist taint.

In 1926, a relative from America offered to help Szántó to obtain a college education in the U.S. Szántó departed with a student visa only to find upon arrival that the relative had lost his money and could not provide the promised aid. Szántó - in Chicago - was confronted with the difficult choice of returning home or seeking employment which - by the terms of his stay in the U. S. - was illegal. He decided to seek employment and found it. At the same time he befriended a Hungarian called Brebics who

turned out to be editor of a Hungarian language Communist paper. Soon Szántó was receiving the paper and in 1928, he became a member of the Communist Party. He held various posts, helping with unemployment relief at one time, coming to the Bronx as party secretary in the 1930's and then - more or less on his own, so he says - striking out to organize the New York transport workers. The aid he received in this task from the party was \$10 a week and moral encouragement. He succeeded in organizing the workers and found the job fascinating because it offered unlimited possibilities for improving the lot of the workers which is what he set out to do and which is according to him the guiding idea of socialism.

During this period he also studied Marxism - Leninism and became increasingly infatuated with the Soviet Union. While the Russo-German pact shook his confidence somewhat, his reading in subsequent years of Walter Duranty's reports from Moscow and of Joseph Davies' Mission to Moscow strengthened his belief in the achievements of the "Socialist Motherland."

Meanwhile in 1940, deportation proceedings were started against him on one charge - illegal entry in the country. His citizenship status had never been cleared up. Once (about 1936-37) the opportunity to go to Cuba in order to obtain a re-entry visa as a regular quota immigrant did arise. However, his trade union colleagues dissuaded him from going for two reasons:

1. In order not to take away a quota number from German refugees who were then in dire need of help, and

2. Because a strike in New York was scheduled and he was needed on the job.

Deportation proceedings were somehow stayed and in 1942, he was drafted. He rose to the rank of sergeant, served 1½ years overseas (Aleutians) but never got his citizenship. In 1947, deportation proceedings were re-opened with the added charge of Communist Party membership and advocacy of violent overthrow of the government. While the CIO aided his cause, expenses of appeals were too high for him to be met and at that time (1948) he got word through a friend (whom he refused to identify) that Rákosi would welcome his return to Hungary. He decided to accept the offer and in 1949, actually departed for Hungary.

Knowing little if anything of the country he bought F. Nagy's book: Behind the Iron Curtain and read it while on the way. The news of Rajk's arrest reached him on the high seas whereupon he decided that taking the book with him to Hungary might not be the wisest thing and destroyed it.

On arriving in Hungary he was, as he puts it, put on ice for about six months. He was wined and dined at first and told to relax and recover from his ordeal. He was visited at intervals by Kiss Károly, the Chairman of the Party Central Commission, and once he had an "audience" with Rákosi who harangued him with stories of American and British intelligence activities, read extensively from testimony collected in connection with the Rajk trial, accused Hungarian Communists in the West and America

especially of having sold out to the imperialists and raved and ranted in general about enemies of the people. Szántó did not quite comprehend the purpose of it all, but decided that Rákosi was putting him on guard lest he had any ideas of disloyalty and sought to provoke him in order to induce him (Szántó) to exert his utmost to show that he was as good a Communist and worker as those trained in Moscow. In this, according to Szántó, Rákosi succeeded quite well, for he (Szántó) devoted himself to work and applied himself zealously to his task throughout his entire stay in Hungary (i.e., until November 21, 1956).

Shortly after his talk with Rákosi, Szántó received his membership card retroactive to the date of his entry in the C.P. of America. He was also given a position as assistant division chief in the Ministry of Food in charge of meat and poultry processing. He held this position uninterrupted until his escape, except for the fact that he moved up to acting chief in 1951, remained acting until 1954, when he was made chief.

Aside from serving in this capacity, Mr. Szántó was not called on to perform party functions except as:

1. educational director of his ministry's party cell for a period of a few months in 1950;
2. simultaneous translator from Hungarian into English during the 3rd Party Congress of the HWP in May, 1954.

He sought to convey the impression of never having been close to the political apparatus of the party either in the U. S. or in Hungary. He pictured himself as an idealist, a union organizer and economic specialist successively and concomitantly.

He characterized his stay in Hungary as less than ideal, for he claims to have lived in part in fear of being the potential protagonist of another anti-American spy trial (a possibility which all appearances to the contrary ~~notwithstanding~~ cannot be dismissed out of hand) and in part in isolation from his colleagues who dubbed him "the American Szántó" and shunned him or criticized him for his American wife, way of life, clothes and viewpoints. He attributes his survival without molestation to his long honorable standing in the party and his non-political position.

His leaving in November 1956, was motivated by disillusionment with Communism and a fear of a return to dark terror. He emphasized that he could have stayed, Apró, Dögei and Marosán (all prominent in the present regime) were his good friends and he could have had a foreign assignment had he desired it. This was by way of removing any doubt as to the honorable nature of his departure or the persistence of any *arrière pensée* re Communism.

Mr. Szántó is at the moment given to self-pity of rather great proportions though not to regret over his past. He feels he has been a clean Communist who believed - as a victim of the "logic of the situation" as he put it and of the oft-mouthed Communist cliché that if you say A you must say B -- in a cause, sustained by what he thought to be the practical achievement of the USSR both as an industrial power and military savior of Europe. He now claims to have grave doubts re:



a) the ethical basis of Communism and political morality of totalitarian rule unchecked by "pressure from below";

b) the economic validity of socialist tenets, i.e., social ownership of the means of production. He feels that economic competition in the free market is essential.

The history of his own disillusionment was only sketchily traced by Mr. Szántó. Early reference to Rajk was not followed up by logical imputation of rigging. On the contrary, he said that in terms of accepted scriptures the notion of class enemy penetration of the ranks of the working class movement is wholly believable and he himself while half-expecting to be arrested, yet knowing to be innocent, was already making excuses for the party's mistake in his own case in view of the obvious guilt of others. By his own account, doubts began to make themselves felt in 1953, after Stalin's death. However, he-as an "organization man" by instinct and training - observed at first not the unethical and immoral character of the regime which then was thrust to the surface, but the split in party unity, the lack of purpose and factionalism which obstructed the leading role of the party, provided opportunities for the masses to exploit party differences and thus make their wishes felt, and sowed the seeds of ultimate destruction. (This characterization strictly accords with the good book of Leninism, which I told Szántó, who simply said that the good book was in this respect right.) It was not until 1956 that Szántó's disquietude about the moral basis of the Communist regime assumed haunting proportions. The two factual triggers propelling him along this line were:

- a) the rehash of the Rajk case and,
- b) Khrushchev's secret speech.

Szántó asserts that he became maniacal about the Rajk affair and sought by hook or crook to find out Rákosi's personal guilt in the matter. His answer came on May 28, when Rakosi made a speech (I believe it was to the Budapest party aktiv) admitting in effect not only the innocence of Rajk but the fact that he, Rákosi, knew of Rajk's innocence at the time he ordered Rajk and others executed.

Subsequently he had an opportunity to read Khrushchev's speech in the Daily Worker, some copies of which were received in Hungary. The story of Stalin's crimes on and against Communists caused complete revulsion in Szántó. According to him (returning to the earlier theme of persecution) the fabrication of charges against the "praetorian guard" on whom the party must and ought to rely, revealed the baseness and evil of leading circles and since the whole movement is dependent on the direction of the leading circles, this to him meant that the apparatus was manipulated with total cynicism and the ideals which he cherished had no role whatever. (Szántó's characterization may well be accepted as genuine for himself and many "believers". There is no doubt that Khrushchev's speech caused tremendous internal crisis in the Communist movement. The interesting point is that the speech seems to have been made [perhaps demanded] in order to assuage the continuous fears of the Communist core of wanton destruction in its own ranks. The disillusionment and the ensuing emotional trauma may have either been left out of consideration or underestimated in the intensity.



It is, of course, also possible that a calculated risk was taken because it was necessary in terms of Soviet domestic politics and the price, however high, simply had to be paid lest greater catastrophes followed.)

It was at this point that Szántó took what he calls the first and only political step throughout his stay in Hungary. He visited a friend who was a member of the Party Central Committee (possibly Dögei, though Szántó did not identify the person by name) and told him that things could no longer be tolerated as they were being carried out. Rákosi must go, Imre Nagy must return and sweeping changes in policy and personnel must be made. (Szántó claims to have made this suggestion despite later opinion uttered about Nagy to the effect that he had no organizational talents and lacked the support of the Party apparatus which is essential to ruling a country.)

The substantive aspects of Mr. Szántó's remarks can be summarized in the following:

1. The Revolution: the revolution broke out because the Party was disunited, torn from within by strife. Effective power, in October 1956, was not exercised by the Party which did not know where to turn and what to do. Example: in a vote taken in the Party organization of the Ministry of Interior (including the top level AVH people) about two weeks prior to the revolution there was a deep split, with a strong faction supporting Nagy and advocating changes. Thus, in Mr. Szántó's opinion, the revolution could have been prevented even on the morning of the 23rd, but the catch was that the AVH itself, which could have prevented the revolution was, ~~the~~

for internal reasons, incapable of going into concerted action. From then on it was only a matter of time before the Party apparatus and carefully built system of government collapsed completely.

Mr. Szántó himself continued his work in the Ministry of Food throughout the revolution and was one of 3 division chiefs who were endorsed by the revolutionary council of the Ministry.

2. Post revolutionary developments: Following Nov. 4, Mr. Szántó continued to believe in the possibility of some improvement. It was not until the Imre Nagy affair of Nov. 22, that he decided that Stalinism was back.

3. Potential developments following a victory of the revolution: Turning to the right with some Catholic party's victory in elections.

4. Antecedents of the revolution: Impossible to pinpoint entirely, but loss of unity of purpose following Stalin's death played an immense role.

Under Stalinism - as Mr. Szántó put it - despite everything, everyone had hope in a better future and the Party led as it must in a dictatorship. After Stalin's death the situation changed. First of all there was the antagonism between Nagy and Rákosi. According to Mr. Szántó the antagonism did not exist prior to the summer of 1953, when Mr. Nagy - with Moscow support - was set forth as the spokesman of change. Mr. Nagy's mistake was that he appealed to the people over the heads of the Party apparatus and this you cannot do.

Mr. Rákosi immediately seized the opportunity and within a week had the Party apparatus behind him. As a result, despite Nagy's popularity and the appeal of his policies, he lacked the instrument with which to implement policy, i.e. the Party. From then on there was no serious possibility of change during the so called "new course."

Later, however, confusion in the Party ranks mounted, the 20th Congress, Poznan, the Rajk funeral, all played a role in bringing about loosening of Party discipline and greater daring on the part of the people.

Of the grievances the people had, the lack of tangible economic improvements was of the greatest importance. To these, of course, political and moral grievances have to be added. But without the really bad economic conditions the other grievances would not have welled up as they did.

5. The appeal of Communism in Hungary: It would be a mistake to believe retrospectively that Communism had ~~and~~ no appeal in Hungary. The "building of socialism", as conceived by <sup>the</sup> people, was something glorious and many people were genuinely enthusiastic about it. Mr. Szántó - contrary to most other people - attributed the large membership of the Party to noble motivations and belief in the tenets of Marxism - Leninism. People attended seminars and Marxism - Leninism lectures not because they had to as a matter of compulsion but of their free will to partake of the knowledge of a theory that explained human phenomena and held out the prospect of a better future.

The loss of appeal coincided with the gradual discovery of economic and political evils of the regime around 1951-1952.

6. Economic and social conditions: Mr. Szántó painted a somewhat confused, even contradictory, picture of economic and social conditions. At one and the same time he claimed that top Party leaders were a caste off and by themselves with incredible privileges and that

<sup>the</sup> A Communist elite was not sufficiently interested in the regime in material terms to make it "do or die" for the system. I.e., there was too much egalitarianism. Yet workers were not well off.

Mr. Szántó illustrated the point by citing his own case. He made in the neighborhood of 3,000 forints a month plus 300 forints longevity allowance. Of this he paid 800 forints a month on rent and utilities. He had an official car (no private vehicle of his own) which he could use for private purposes up to 250 km per week. They had a maid, but could maintain <sup>her</sup> ~~him~~ only because the wife worked and earned <sup>what</sup> somewhat more than <sup>the</sup> the maid cost.

Mr. Szántó had the privilege of attending a recreation center at Lake Balaton where for 8 forints a day he got about 60 forints worth of services. By all accounts he attended the center as often as he could. N.b. this was a center for "division chiefs" like himself. However, workers enjoyed similar privileges. According to Mr. Szántó, while economic conditions were generally bad, the range of "fringe benefits" increased tremendously.

This was an undoubted achievement of the regime on which a great deal of money was spent, even wasted, without commensurate appreciation by the workers, who in Hungary <sup>just</sup> ~~as~~ elsewhere remained money, i.e., wage minded and deplored the norm system (i.e., piece rates) and the lack of purchasable goods.

Expounding further on this point, Mr. Szántó claimed that the fringe benefits introduced by the regime constituted, perhaps incidentally, a definite achievement now taken for granted by

everyone. It would not be possible to deprive the workers of these in the future, no matter what.

Concurrently with this, the trade unions were completely perverted in their function and the workers despised them. The leadership of the unions consisted of people who had no feeling for and appreciation of the mass of workers, but only contempt. (E.G., Mr. Apró whom Szántó claimed to know well.)

In his domain, Mr. Szántó claimed, enormous mistakes were committed which he had hoped to correct. He had taken trips to Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and England. Wrote reports on his findings and hoped that these would bring about the reorganization of animal husbandry.

Re Hungary's exploitation <sup>by</sup> ~~of~~ Russia and the ~~inanity~~ of central economic planning, Mr. Szántó gave only general and fairly well known information. He did cite a specific example on planning, in that he had to sign (having first read them) some dozens of plan proposals daily, each for a different sector of his limited area of endeavor.

7. Party and State: The existing relationships between Party and State (or economic) organs was described by Mr. Szántó in terms not wholly unfamiliar to the student of Soviet affairs.

On the whole the Party organ and its role in State offices became increasingly important and dominant during 1950-1951. There ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> - as a result - considerable struggle as to official competence and decision making authority.



Mr. Szántó's own shop was in 1951 unceremoniously reorganized from top to bottom so that few of his 40-45 employees remained. He had no jurisdiction in the matter, although he remained at his post throughout. This, however, was the most severe reorganization. Others, altogether 3 or 4, always reflected attempts at administrative conformity with the prevailing Soviet pattern. Given the time lag between Soviet and Hungarian administrative changes, at times the ludicrous situation arose whereby Hungary had just completed a reorganization when the Soviet Union restored the former system.

Within his own shop Mr. Szántó claimed that due to his forceful attitude the Party cell did not play a preponderant role, but it had veto powers over personnel appointment and supervisory powers in general (i.e., it could recommend but not order). The preponderance of the Party cell (i.e., the Party secretary,) varied in relation to the strength of the government official involved.

Further down the line, however, things were more difficult. In the plants and factories under Mr. Szántó's jurisdiction he had much less authority than the local party secretary who, through the territorial chain of command to which he belonged, exercised stringent control.

Soviet advisers: There were none in Mr. Szántó's Ministry, largely because the last Minister, Mr. Altamary was virtually a Soviet citizen, a rabid Stalinist who could be fully trusted. In other Ministries the situation varied somewhat.



8. Leading Party personalities:

Rákosi: Szántó met him twice. At first he struck Mr. Szántó as a brilliant man, too big for a small country such as Hungary; when Mr. Szántó met Rákosi again in 1956, (it was a chance encounter at a resort) the Communist chief seemed and acted as if "possessed."

Nagy: Erudite, professorial, a gentleman, retiring even to the extent of being isolated. Never really understood what Bolshevism was and what its organizational bases were.

Altamary: Brutal, fanatical Communist, given to sadistic practices.

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Conclusions: At the end of a long day's interview Mr. Szántó claimed to be exhausted by the emotional experience of the questioning. He reiterated his requests concerning assistance.

Interviewer's impressions of Mr. Szántó was that of a thoroughly disillusioned and beaten man. Though Mr. Szántó claimed to be a born leader ~~or men~~ and <sup>an</sup> extremely capable organizer, he seemed in many respects submissive to authority, naive, gullible, and in need of substantial props to get along in life.

Considering everything, he struck the interviewer as very well spoken, well read, quiet and intelligent. His sincerity concerning his change of mind and heart could not be assessed beyond doubt. He appeared sincere enough and on impulse one would certainly be inclined to accept his story without reservation. The only disturbing element in his statements was an almost too pat definition of the evils of Communism, and of a formulation so obviously designed to please an American as to make one suspicious.