

RESEARCH

Hungarian man among the Korean freedom fighters

Researching the legend of ‘Magyar’ – A mysterious Hungarian bomb expert among the Korean freedom fighters in the early 1920s

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Abstract: According to a legendary story, in the early 1920s, a foreigner bomb expert appeared among the Korean independence fighters, who was a former Hungarian soldier from World War I. The author attempted to identify the mysterious Hungarian figure using archival documents. The research follows the life of the story’s Korean protagonist to 1950s North Korea.

Kivonat: Egy legendás történet szerint az 1920-as évek elején a koreai függetlenségi harcosok között felbukkant egy külföldi bombaszakértő, aki egy magyar első világháborús hadifogoly volt. A szerző archív dokumentumok segítségével kísérletet tett a rejtélyes magyar személy beazonosítására. A történet koreai főhősének életútját az 1950-es évekbeli Észak-Koreaig követjük nyomon.

Keywords: Korea, independence movement, freedom fighters, Hungarian POW, bomb factory, Mongolia, Shanghai

Kulcsszavak: Korea, függetlenségi mozgalom, szabadságharcosok, magyar hadifoglyok, bombagyár, Mongólia, Sanghaj

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Photos (l-r): Application by a Hungarian man named Gábor Magyar for a Chinese domestic passport to travel from Shanghai to Zhili (now Hebei) province in December 1922; A World War I POW named Gábor Magyar, who is likely the same as the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert; Map of Mongolia in the 1920s (sources: Mózes Csoma, Jozsef Geleta).

Korea was a tributary state of the Qing Empire of China for centuries, but this relation ended as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. However, formal independence did not last long, as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 reshaped the balance of power in East Asia. The Japanese Empire first established a protectorate on the Korean Peninsula, and then abolished the country's independent statehood in 1910. These developments led to national resistance on the peninsula, culminating in demonstration demanding national independence in Seoul on March 1, 1919. Although the Japanese authorities crushed the uprising that lasted for weeks, many Korean independence activists went abroad, where they began intensive organizing for the liberation of their homeland.

It was only recently that the legend about a foreign bomb expert known as 'Magyar' was active among the Korean independence fighters in the early 1920s, became widely known. The story became known thanks to the South Korean movie *Miljeong - The Age of Shadows*, which was screened in Seoul in 2016. The film features a Hungarian bomb expert who had been prisoner of war during World War I in Russia, than moved to China, where the members of the Korean freedom fighters (the Uiyoldan organization) acquired a large amount of explosives from him. The film is based on the life of a famous Korean independence fighter named Kim Won-bong (1898-1958?), about whom a Korean writer named Park Tae-won (1909-1986) wrote a patriotic book after the Japanese colonial rule. Since both the writer and the main character of the book left for North Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War, uncovering the identity of the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert is not an easy task. Recently, I made many researches in the Hungarian archive sources to uncover the real events behind the legend.¹

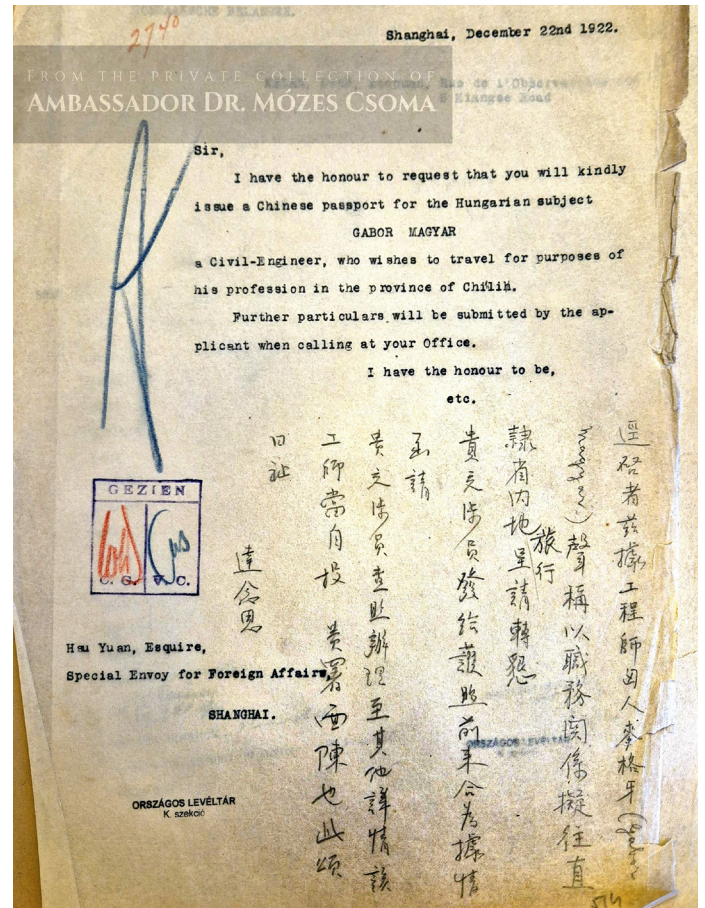
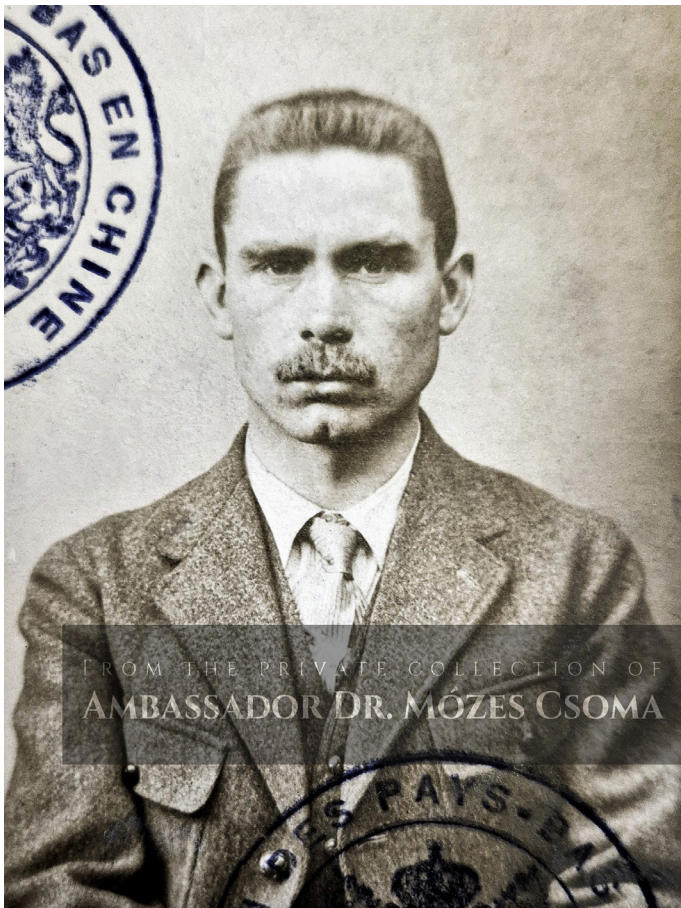
The main characters of the legend

The main characters of the legend are important heroes of the Korean independence movement. In the spring of 1919, after the collapse of the March First Movement, many Korean independence activists went abroad. Many of them believed that the leaders of the independence movement had been too moderate and that more radical action was needed against Japanese colonial rule. This goal was represented by the Uiyoldan organization, founded in 1919 in Jilin Province, Manchuria, led by Kim Won-bong. According to the patriotic book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* written by Park Tae-won in 1947, dozens of independence fighters were available to carry out attacks, but they did not have the appropriate weapons. Kim Won-bong thus decided to procure very powerful explosives.²

At that time, there were several foreigners in Beijing who were skilled in the use of explosives, and Kim Won-bong selected three of them: an Italian, an Austrian, and a German. The latter made the best explosives, although he was not perfect either. Meanwhile, another foreign bomb expert who was in Mongolia and who is referred to in the book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* as 'Magyar' came into Kim Won-bong's sights. In this point, we must mention another key figure in the legend, Dr. Lee Tae-jun (1883-1921). Lee studied at Severance Medical School in Seoul, and joined the independence movement himself. The physician moved to Mongolia,

1 The author would like to express his gratitude to the following persons: Prof. Dr. Sándor Szakály (Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary); Prof. Dr. Piotr Ostaszewski (former Ambassador of Poland to Seoul); Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi (HUN-REN Humanities Research Center, Budapest); Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Gábor Kiss (Vienna Branch of the Hungarian Military History Archives); Elek Nagy (director, Orient Projekt, Budapest).

2 Park, 2015, pp. 125-126.



established a hospital there and acted as a liaison to help Korean independence fighters get from Russia to China.

According to the aforementioned book, Dr. Lee Tae-jun met the Hungarian bomb expert in Urga (now Ulaanbaatar) and promised Kim Won-bong, who was in Beijing, that he would take the Hungarian there. Dr. Lee and ‘Magyar’ set off for Beijing, but before reaching the city of Zhangjiakou, they ran into Russian soldiers in the middle of the desert; which obviously refers to the Asiatic Cavalry Division led by Baron Ungern-Sternberg. An officer recognized and shot Dr. Lee, who lost his life.³

Figure 1. A World War I POW named Gábor Magyar, who is likely the same as the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert (Source: Dr. Mózes Csoma)

Figure 2. Application by a Hungarian man named Gábor Magyar for a Chinese domestic passport to travel from Shanghai to Zhili (now Hebei) province in December 1922 (Source: Dr. Mózes Csoma)

The unknown history of the Hungarian bomb factory in Urga

During the First World War, about half a million Hungarian soldiers were taken prisoner in Russia, who were sent to various parts of the Tsarist Empire. Since the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert appeared in the sights of Korean independence fighters while in Mongolia, it is likely that he was held in one of the POW camps in the Lake Baikal region. In 1917, the number of POWs in the possible camps was as follows: Krasnoyarsk 13,000; Anchinsk 2,750; Kansk 6,000; Nizhny Novgorod 2,200; Irkutsk 8,800; Verkhnye-Udinsk 8,500; Berezovka 27,500; Troitskosavsk 6,700; Chita 32,500 people; Streletsk 11,000 people; Nerchinsk 2,500 people; Dauria 11,500 people.⁴

From the region of Lake Baikal, many Hungarian POWs tried to escape and go to home via Mongolia, but the conditions were also chaotic there. The country

³ Park, 2015, pp. 130, 132.

⁴ Pach, 1978, pp. 107-108.

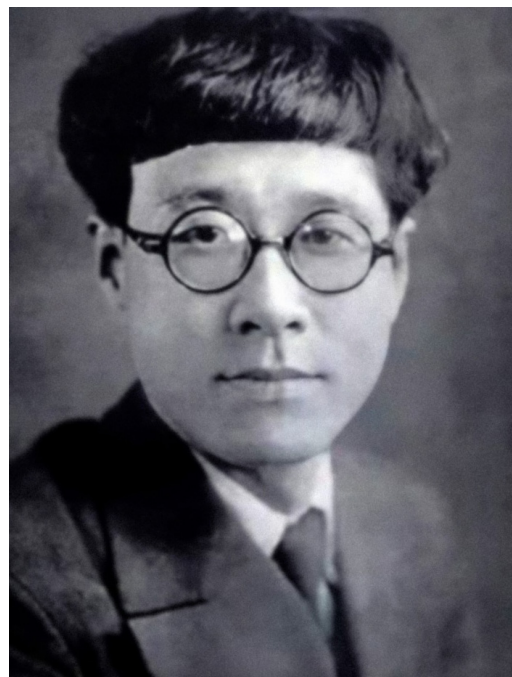
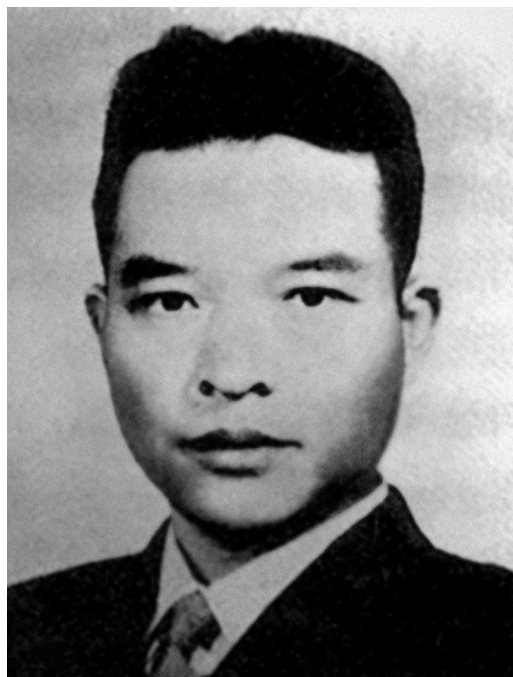


Figure 3. Korean freedom fighter Kim Won-bong (1898–1958?) (Source: Public Commons)

Figure 4. Korean writer Park Tae-won (1909–1986) (Source: Public Commons)

was occupied by China in 1919, but at the end of 1920, as a sideline of the Soviet-Russian civil war, the Asiatic Cavalry Division led by Baron Ungern-Sternberg invaded the country.⁵ From the perspective of our research, it is not negligible – and this is where the very important connections begin – that a group of Hungarian prisoners of war operated a bomb factory in Urga (now Ulaanbaatar) between December 1920 and February 1921.⁶

The account of this can be read in the memoirs of József Geleta (1895–1965), a former prisoner of war and later a researcher of Mongolia. Geleta arrived in the Mongolian capital just before November 1920, having already been in the city when Baron Ungern-Sternberg first attempted to besiege it. Although Ungern's troops were pushed back by the Chinese, the civil war situation still persisted, and the young Hungarian had to find an income-generating activity. At the instigation of the Chinese, the Hungarians established a bomb factory to produce mine-like explosive devices with which they could block the roads around Urga, in order to prevent a possible new attack by Baron Ungern. The entire Chinese officer corps was present at the test explosion, the demonstration was very successful.⁷ Perhaps it was then that Dr. Lee Tae-jun learned about the high-quality explosives produced by the Hungarian bomb factory.

The Chinese planned to make the casings for the explosive devices in an iron foundry, but this was not immediately available. At this point, it is important to

5 Roman Fyodorovich Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921): Tsarist Russian military officer, Mongolian warlord. A person of Estonian origin, he completed his military studies in St. Petersburg. From 1908 he served in Siberia, then participated in the battles of World War I in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. After the October Revolution, he became one of the important leaders of the White troops in the southeastern part of Siberia, but from the autumn of 1920 he acted as an independent warlord. After entering Mongolia, he acted as a military dictator, his followers mystified him and considered him the reincarnation of Genghis Khan. In 1921 he launched an attack against the Soviet Red Army, but after initial successes, the Reds captured him and executed him.

6 Forbáth, 1934, pp. 118–122.

7 Forbáth, 1934, pp. 118–122.

highlight one of Geleta's comments: speaking about the bomb factory, the man states in one place that several Hungarian prisoners of war worked on making the mines; and he managed to agree with the Chinese leadership that if 200 explosive device casings will be manufactured well in the iron foundry, the Chinese would transport all Hungarians to Beijing by car.⁸ So the Hungarians wanted to go to China, and Dr. Lee Tae-jun might have offered one of them to join the Uiyoldan organization in China.

However, developments turned out to be contrary to expectations. The primitive iron foundry did not meet expectations, instead of metal, the bricks of the foundry melted, so the decision was made to obtain fireproof bricks from the gold mine in Dzumodo (now Zuunmod), 40 kilometers from Urga. Some Hungarians went to that location, but soon after the siege of the city began, which ended in victory for the troops of Baron Ungern-Sternberg.⁹ The battle of Urga, as recorded in history books, took place between February 1-4, 1921, so the Hungarians could have left the city before January 30, 1921. It is also possible that several member of the Hungarian bomb factory in Urga remained in the city until the summer of 1921, when Baron Ungern's rule ended.

Park Tae-won's book about the mysterious 'Magyar'

After Dr. Lee Tae-jun's tragic death, Kim Won-bong was unable to contact 'Magyar', but soon after, he heard a strange news in Beijing. The news was that a young foreign man was addressing Koreans in Beijing pubs and was looking for Kim Won-bong. As a result, Kim sought out the foreigner, who was really the Hungarian bomb expert. Kim and 'Magyar' traveled from Beijing to Shanghai, where they acquired a European-style house through Kim's lawyer friends. The house was registered in the name of 'Magyar', who set up his workshop in the basement of the building. The Hungarian technician lived in the building with a Korean man who helped him assemble the explosive devices, the assistant disguised as a cook. A Korean independence fighter woman also moved into the house. She was Hyon Gye-ok, a former *kisaeng* who became close associate of Kim Won-bong.¹⁰ To others, it must have looked that a European man living in the house with a pretty Asian woman, and an Asian cook taking care of them.¹¹ Kim only visited them every two or three days so as not to arouse suspicion. After about two months, Kim and 'Magyar' sailed out to sea one morning with three or four 'comrades' and then carried out the test explosions on a small island 50 *ri* far from Shanghai. The test explosions were successful, and the bombs assembled by the Hungarian technician worked perfectly.¹²

Who was the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert?

First of all, we must state that the only evidence of the existence of the searched person is Park Tae-won's patriotic book, we have no other concrete source that 'Magyar' really existed. The explanation for this is that the person in question practically worked as a bomb manufacturer in cooperation with the Uiyoldan organization; and he is indirectly, but obviously, responsible for the assassinations carried out by the organization. Obviously, no one likes to report on such activ-

8 Forbáth, 1934, pp. 122.

9 Forbáth, 1934, p. 125.

10 *Kisaeng*: entertainment girl, Korean version of the geisha.

11 Park, 2015, p. 134.

12 Park, 2015, pp. 139-140.

ities, unless the change in the political environment makes the actions glorious. Since the story of the bomb expert ‘Magyar’ did not spread in either socialist Hungary or North Korea after World War II, two possibilities can be concluded about him: 1, the person died before the end of World War II, so he did not have the opportunity to regard his previous activities as glorious in the changed political environment; 2, the person did not return to socialist Hungary after World War II, but continued his life by keeping his former actions a deep secret. The latter may also explain why Kim Won-bong – who later became Minister of Labor in North Korea – made no attempt to track down his old comrade-in-arms.

The word ‘Magyar’ in Hungarian language means ‘Hungarian person’. However, an important question is whether the Koreans knew this in the 1920s, and if the bomb expert was named after his origin, why didn’t they use some form of the word ‘Hyungari’, since that is what the Koreans called Hungarians at the time. It is much more likely that Koreans did not use this word because of the person’s origin, but rather because it was the person’s family name. According to our current knowledge, there was a prisoner of war with the family name ‘Magyar’ during the relevant period and at the relevant locations, who, according to contemporary documents, also had a technical education, so he could indeed have understood how to assemble explosive devices. According to his birth certificate preserved in the archives, Gábor Magyar (full name Gábor József Magyar) was born in Selmecbánya in 1896. Some documents mention him as an engineer, others as a mechanic.¹³ There is almost no information available about his military service in World War I and his capture as a prisoner of war, except that the Legation of the Netherlands in Beijing, representing Hungarian interests, issued him a temporary passport in February 1922.¹⁴

This means that he must have reached the Chinese capital via the Gobi Desert, so he may have previously stayed in Urga, where – as someone with technical knowledge – he may have been in contact with the Hungarian bomb factory. The man continued his journey from Beijing to Shanghai in early 1922, where, according to documents, he stayed until the end of the year. However, an unexpected development occurred after this: in December 1922, Gábor Magyar applied for a Chinese domestic passport, but not to leave the country, but to travel within the country. According to the surviving document, he wanted to travel to the northern Zhili (now Hebei) province ‘in connection with his engineering activities’.¹⁵ Is it a coincidence that he wanted to travel towards the Korean Peninsula?

Three weeks later, in January 1923, the Uiyoldan organization carried out a successful bombing in the colonial Korea. An independence fighter named Kim Sang-ok detonated a bomb in the Chongro district police station in downtown Seoul. Although Kim Sang-ok successfully went into hiding, five days later the Japanese police found his hideout and launched a manhunt to capture him. Kim first fled to Namsan Mountain and then barricaded himself in a house in Hyocha

13 National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

14 National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.

15 National Archives of Hungary, HU-MNL-OL-K 672.



Figure 5. Korean medical doctor and freedom fighter, Dr. Lee Tae-jun (1883–1921) (Source: Public Commons)



Figure 6. Hyon Gye-ok (1897-?): female Korean independence activist (Source: Public Commons)

district. A few days later, hundreds of police surrounded the building and Kim committed suicide.

Kim Won-bong's Visit to Hungary

As mentioned above, after liberation from Japanese colonial rule, Kim Won-bong left for the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, where he became an important member of the communist regime. However, there is no evidence that Kim ever told the staff of the Hungarian mission in Pyongyang, established in April 1950, that he had worked with a Hungarian bomb expert during the 'Shanghai days'. Kim later served as the DPRK's Minister of Labor, and in early April 1955 he personally visited Hungary as part of a North Korean delegation that participated in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the liberation from German occupation. Prior to the trip, the Hungarian ambassador in Pyongyang, Pál Szarvas, invited the members of the delegation to a dinner, which took place on March 21, 1955 at 7 p.m. The meeting was attended by Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik, Kim Won-bong, and the North Korean Ambassador to Budapest, Ahn Yong, who was currently in Pyongyang. As a practicing diplomat, the writer of these words knows perfectly well that anecdotes proving the friendship and connection between the two distant nations are usually discussed at such dinners, but – according to a foreign affairs note kept in the Hungarian National Archives – during the conversation, Kim Won-bong did not say a single word about his former Hungarian acquaintance. Although the similarities in the history of the Korean and Hungarian peoples and the parallels in the structure of the two languages were discussed, it was Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik who basically spoke, and Kim Won-bong remained silent.¹⁶

¹⁶ National Archives of Hungary, MNL XIX-J-14 (Box 6, 50–159).

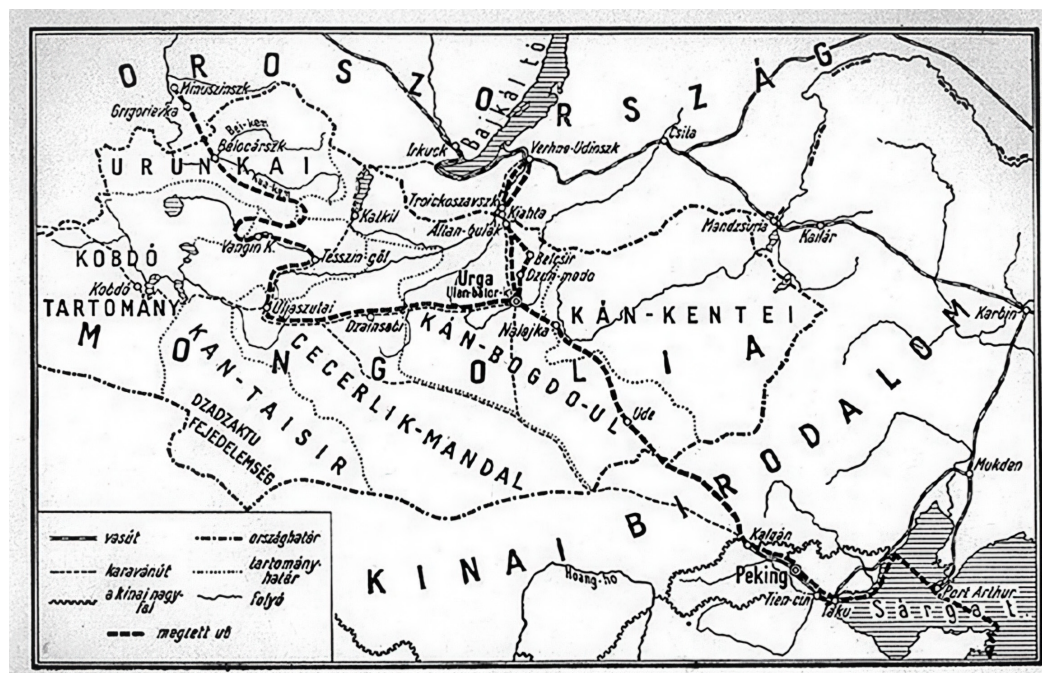


Figure 7. Map of Mongolia in the 1920s from József Geleta's memoir (Source: József Geleta)

The delegation finally departed from Pyongyang two days later on a scheduled flight, arriving in Budapest almost a week later, on April 1, 1955.¹⁷ As the press of the time reveals, delegations from all socialist countries also attended the reception of the Soviet embassy in Budapest in addition to the state celebrations; the summary of the party newspaper *Szabad Nép* mentioned that Kim Won-bong attended the event not only in his ministerial capacity, but also as the leader of the People's Republic Party of the North Korean state.¹⁸ However, in contemporary articles and foreign affairs records, there is not a single word about Kim Won-bong's Hungarian comrade-in-arms.

The Korean government delegation left Hungary on April 9, 1955.¹⁹ As the report of the Hungarian mission in Pyongyang describes, the delegation arrived in Pyongyang on April 16, 1955, on a scheduled flight, and the charge d'affaires of the Hungarian embassy hosted a dinner in their honor shortly afterwards. The meeting provided an opportunity to share experiences and impressions gained in Hungary. Although this time, Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik spoke the most, praising the standard of living and culture of the Hungarian people; but eventually Kim Won-bong also had the floor. However, the Minister of Labor spoke only about the great influence that Hungarian factories and their social institutions, such as the resorts, had had on him. Kim added that he had learned a lot and hoped that he would be able to use what he had seen in Korean conditions. According to the report, Deputy Prime Minister Choe Chang-ik then intervened, saying that Kim would be obliged to use what he had seen. The report said Choe Chang-ik's remark was 'half-joking', but it also points to the fault lines that were emerging in the DPRK leadership at the time.²⁰ The vice premier was removed from power in the fall of 1956 for 'factional behavior' and later executed; Kim was

17 *Szabad Nép*, 1955a.

18 *Szabad Nép*, 1955a.

19 *Szabad Nép*, 1955b.

20 National Archives of Hungary, MNL XIX-J-14. (Box 6, 50-159.)

caught up in internal purges in 1958, and the exact circumstances of his death are unknown.

Conclusion

An important question is why Kim Won-bong never mentioned his former Hungarian comrade-in-arms during his stay in Hungary? If ‘Magyar’ had died during the anti-Japanese struggle, perhaps during World War II, then Kim Won-bong could have proudly mentioned him as a martyr of the common struggle. It is much more likely that the former bomb expert’s activities and possibly his lifestyle made him unworthy of ever being mentioned by Kim, who is deeply committed to the communist ideology. The reason for becoming unworthy could also be as simple as the fact that ‘Magyar’ later started a business venture, thus turning him into an exploitative capitalist in Kim’s eyes.

The details of Gábor Magyar’s activities are of course not revealed in the documents preserved by the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai. All that is known about his later life is that in the summer of 1929 he married a Russian widow living in Shanghai. A year and a half later, in December 1930, a Hungarian prisoner of war named Tibor Parragh returned home from Shanghai and reported to Hungarian journalists that there were still many former Hungarian prisoners of war in Shanghai, among whom was the mechanic Gábor Magyar. According to the newspaper article briefly reporting on the Hungarians who remained in Shanghai, Gábor Magyar sent greetings to his younger sister who was living in Budapest at that time.²¹ Following the news report, in March 1931, the Budapest police summoned the woman, Zsófia Magyar, who worked as a dental assistant, for questioning.²² In the police report, the woman stated that her brother had been a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian 44th Infantry Regiment and had been taken prisoner by the Russians in 1915 or 1916. He sent letters to his sister several times from Shanghai, where his address was: Euginer 125. Boone Rd. Shanghai. According to the woman, her brother worked as a mechanic in various factories in Shanghai.²³

Finally, the question may arise as to what is the situation with the writer Park Tae-won, whose book *Yaksangwa Uiyoldan* is the primary source regarding the existence of ‘Magyar’. Why did Park Tae-won, who also left for North Korea in 1950, not talk about this ‘Hungarian aspect’ to the staff of the Hungarian embassy in Pyongyang? The reason for this is primarily to be found in North Korean internal circumstances: during the Korean War, there was apparently no real opportunity for relation-building, and then, as a result of the show trials against communists of South Korean origin, Park Tae-won was sent to agricultural work. Between 1955 and 1960, he worked in an agricultural cooperative in the Kangso region of South Pyongan Province; and during his absence, the main character of his book, Kim Won-bong, was also subjected to internal purges. Although Park’s health deteriorated, he later returned to the literary life of the DPRK, becoming the country’s recognized historical novelist, but at that time it was obviously not appropriate to remember the book that featured the relationship between Kim

21 *Pesti Napló*, 1930.

22 National Archives of Hungary, K 73 T12-HF-M-974.

23 National Archives of Hungary, K 73 T12-HF-M-974.



Figure 8. Dr. Lee Tae-joon Memorial Park in Ulaanbaatar (Source: photo taken by Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi)

Figure 9. Entrance of the Dr. Lee Tae-joon Memorial Park In Ulaanbaatar (Source: photo taken by Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi)

Figure 10. Symbolic grave of Dr. Lee Tae-joon in Ulaanbaatar (Source: photo taken by Dr. Zsolt Szilágyi)

Won-bong, who had been removed from power, and the mysterious Hungarian bomb expert.

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Statements

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