

On His Majesty's Secret Service

In 1943, an Allied agent known only as 'H' contacted the Budapest underground movement. His mission was to turn the Hungarian leadership against the Nazis. Adam LeBor tells the extraordinary story of an unsung wartime hero

The Independent, December 2000.

In the summer of 1944, Nazi-occupied Budapest was a city dancing on the edge of disaster. SS officers and their girlfriends packed the elegant restaurants and cafes along the banks of the Danube. The Gypsy violinists played on, their tempo touched with frenzy. Intrigue and deception hung in the air, thick as the plumes of smoke curling upwards. But the veneer of sophistication was a brittle carapace: the Allies were advancing through the west, the Red Army thundering forward from the east.

Over on the Buda side of the river, hidden in a secret apartment in the historic royal palace, an escaped Allied POW was listening to a different music: the click of the Morse code messages his radio operator was sending to London. Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Howie was engaged on a mission improbable - to persuade Hungary's leader Admiral Miklos Horthy to turn against the Germans and join the Allies.

Such are the contradictions and duplicities of wartime national self-interest, that even though Admiral Horthy was an ally of Hitler - he once gave him a yacht for his birthday - he housed, fed and hid Col Howie from the Gestapo. Horthy's daughter-in-law, Ilona, smuggled him food, ordering huge meals for herself from the kitchen, which she would then hide in a container for the Allied agent. Air raids were frequent, but Col Howie could not use the shelter. Worried for his safety during one bombardment, Ilona went to check on him and found him singing lustily in the bathroom.

Col Howie's mission was an accident of war. He had received no training in clandestine operations or underground life. Born in 1905 in South Africa, he was captured at Tobruk in 1942, from where he was sent to a POW camp in Italy. From Italy Col Howie was sent to Stalag 8B at Breslau (now Wroclaw in Poland). He escaped on 26 September 1943, crawling 75yds down a tunnel 2ft by 2ft. His fake papers were good enough to fool the Gestapo at Vienna station, from where he reached Budapest.

In Budapest, he was rapidly taken on board by the well- established underground network that aided escaped Allied POWs. Declassified British intelligence documents reveal a world of clandestine liaisons and secret Allied networks operating under the noses of the Nazis in Budapest. Hungary had willingly joined the Axis to regain territories lost after its defeat in 1918, but by 1943 Budapest was putting out feelers towards London, hinting that it might desert Hitler.

A secretary at the Swiss consulate put Howie in touch with a Hungarian Unitarian pastor, Harvard-educated Reverend Alexander Szent- Ivanyi. Rev Szent-Ivanyi put Col Howie in touch with the Polish underground, and later, Hungarian anti-Nazi politicians, including Admiral Horthy's son, Miklos Horthy Jr, leader of the "Extrication Group" which planned to bring Hungary over to the Allies. British documents record how in July 1944, Miklos Horthy first brought Colonel Howie to the royal palace, to meet his father and try to persuade him to change sides.

"This was the first of several meetings which `H' had with the Regent. During these meetings `H' pressed Horthy to surrender immediately to the Russians but Horthy could not make up his mind, partly, as `H' put it, because his honour would not permit him to stab his country in the back, and partly because he still felt that he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by postponing the evil day as long as possible. `H' said that Horthy always listened to the last people to see him, and as the Germans naturally saw him more often than `H', he allowed himself to be swayed by them."

Among Jewish and resistance circles the existence of a group with British connections was known. "I was aware of the fact that several Anglophile Hungarians had got together underground under the leadership of a English major who had remained in the country," records Tivadar Soros, father of the financier George Soros in *Maskerado*, his wartime memoirs of living underground in Nazi- occupied Budapest.

Col Howie attempted to organise armed resistance to the Nazis. Unlike other occupied capitals, such as Warsaw, Prague and Bratislava, there was no uprising in Budapest. Many Hungarians adopted a passive approach to the Germans, to Col Howie's disgust. He was unable to find even half a dozen Hungarians to try to kill the head of the secret police:

“H had no knowledge of any potential Hungarian resistance group. He frequently tried to organise such a group but failed owing to the apathy and fear of the population. As an example of this he wanted to get hold of six Hungarians to start an organisation for shooting well known collaborators, starting off with Peter Hain, chief of Hungarian secret police and SS formations. It took two months to find six Hungarians who were willing to do this and by that time the plan was not feasible and had to be dropped.”

Col Howie had much more respect for the Polish underground: “When speaking of the Hungarians, of whom he has a very low opinion, he said ‘You see I cannot stand cowardice in any form’. This remark is typical of him and it is easy to imagine the mutual respect which he and the Poles must have had for each other. “ Colonel Howie’s view of Hungarians was biased, the report notes: “Except for his contacts at the palace he lived an undercover life, almost entirely with the Poles, so that his picture of Hungarian conditions is, as he himself admits, somewhat one-sided. “

The intelligence documents also give a glimpse into the mindset of wartime British officials, as they discussed options for infiltrating British agents, and the difficulties of blending in with the Hungarian population: “It would be most difficult for a British officer to impress the peasant. One must remember that most matters connected with Hungary or Hungarians are rather ‘Ruritanian’,” one report notes.

Initially, Col Howie tried to live normally. He had a suit made by a Hungarian tailor, and a fake identity card. He frequented restaurants and cafes. His daughter-in-law, Claerwen Howie, now living in South Africa, remembers him as a quiet and unassuming man. “He worked mainly with the Poles, and they would go for drinks and dinner in restaurants with Germans all around them, even though he couldn’t speak one word of German or Hungarian. He had an ability to blend into the background,” said Mrs Howie, author of *An Accidental Agent*, the story of Howie’s wartime adventures.

Admiral Horthy’s overtures to the Allies, and his refusal to deport Hungarian Jews, had provoked the Axis leadership and led to the Nazi invasion of March 1944.

By the autumn of that year, there was still a chance that Admiral Horthy could have placed himself in the Allies’ hands. It was a time for decisive action, action that could have changed the course of the war. But Horthy dithered, despite the

persuasive skills of Col Howie. Even his son, Miklos, despaired of his father's weakness. "Father, if we don't do something soon, we will have to leave the palace with a shopping bag in hand," Miklos Horthy Jr said.

Eventually the Gestapo's radio experts picked up Col Howie's transmissions and it became too dangerous to continue. Admiral Horthy himself notes in his memoirs the departure of Col Howie for Italy, together with a pro-British Hungarian general, Istvan Naday. "On September 22 I dispatched General Naday and the British [sic] Col Howie by plane for the Allied Headquarters at Caserta, near Naples. Col Howie... had been taken by Polish intermediaries to my son who had him smuggled into the palace. He had hidden in the apartments of my aide-de-camp, Tost, until the time came for him to fly to Caserta".

By mid-October Admiral Horthy was ready to join the Allies, but it was too late. He was toppled in a German-backed coup by the Arrow Cross Hungarian Nazis. Budapest's Jews were rounded up and imprisoned in ghettos. Thousands were shot into the Danube. The Admiral and his son were captured by Waffen SS Colonel Otto Skorzeny, the Nazi officer who had rescued Benito Mussolini from imprisonment the year before. Miklos Horthy Jr was taken from the palace rolled up in a carpet, and sent to Mauthausen and then Dachau, where he was liberated by US troops. Admiral Horthy was exiled to Germany, then Portugal, where he died.

As for Col Howie, he returned to South Africa, where he worked as a seed merchant for the family business. He died in 1993 at the age of 88. In Budapest, the royal palace was rebuilt from the rubble. The rooms where Col Howie negotiated with Admiral Horthy are once again illuminated at night, casting a glow over the Danube.

Surviving Hitler: Choices, Corruption and Compromise in the Third Reich, by Adam LeBor and Roger Boyes, is published by Simon & Schuster at £17.99.

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