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## Hungarian Is Faced With Evidence of Role in '42 Atrocity

By [NICHOLAS WOOD](#) and IVANA SEKULARAC

BUDAPEST, Sept. 30 — The past caught up with Sandor Kepiro, 92, on Thursday, when the [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#) identified him as a junior police officer who was twice found guilty of participating in one of the worst atrocities committed by Hungarian forces during World War II.

At a news conference at a synagogue opposite Mr. Kepiro's apartment here, members of the Wiesenthal Center ended what for him had been 60 years of relative anonymity as they issued copies of a recently rediscovered wartime court verdict. The document shows that Mr. Kepiro was charged and found guilty along with 14 other Hungarian Army and paramilitary police officers of taking part in the Novi Sad massacre in northern Serbia in January 1942, in which more than 1,000 people, mostly Jews, were killed.

In an extraordinary scene, Mr. Kepiro returned home from the doctor shortly after the news conference and discovered a crowd of reporters outside his apartment building. Over the next hour, he took questions from reporters at his front door, acknowledging that he had helped round up people before the massacre but denying that he had killed anyone or given orders to shoot.

The massacre, which is known in Serbian history books as the Racija, based on the Serbian word for raid, took place over three days. Hungarian forces, who occupied Novi Sad after their German allies conquered Yugoslavia in 1941, rounded up hundreds of families and eventually mowed them down with machine-gun fire on the shores of the Danube. The bodies were then dumped into the icy waters, which had to be broken up by artillery fire.

Although found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in prison, Mr. Kepiro never served his sentence — he was freed by [Hungary's](#) fascist leadership shortly after his trial by a previous government in Budapest in 1944 and fled to Argentina after the war. He was convicted again, in absentia, in 1946 by the new Communist government in Hungary. He returned to Budapest in 1996, after the Communists fell, after consulting with Hungarian Embassy officials in Argentina who said he could come back, he said Thursday.

Mr. Kepiro has not been arrested, and it is not clear whether he will face prosecution or imprisonment. A spokesman for the military prosecutor in Budapest said his previous convictions were no longer valid and that it would be up to the civilian courts to start a new investigation.

Speaking to reporters in Budapest, Efraim Zuroff, the director of the Wiesenthal Center's Jerusalem office, listed Mr. Kepiro, a former lawyer, as one of four leading suspects he said he hoped would be tried in connection with crimes committed during the Nazi era. The pursuit, which the center calls Operation: Last Chance, hopes to find and prosecute criminals from World War II.

The other three suspects are Milovoj Aser, a former Croatian police commander, accused of persecuting Jews in Slavenska Pozega, Croatia; Charles Zentai, a Hungarian accused of killing an 18-year-old Jew in Budapest, and Aribert Heim, a doctor accused of conducting medical experiments on inmates at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria.

All of the suspects are in their early 90's. According to the Wiesenthal Center, Mr. Zentai lives in Australia, where he is fighting an extradition request by Hungary, and Mr. Aser lives in Austria. Mr. Heim's location is unknown, but the center says it believes he is alive.

In Hungary, the Novi Sad massacre is one of the most-discussed atrocities of the Nazi era, and it has featured prominently in books and films, including the 1966 movie "Hideg Napok," or "Cold Nights."

In Novi Sad, too, memories are relatively fresh, at least among the elderly, of what happened from Jan. 21 to 23, in the middle of a bitter winter.

Eva Volcevic, now 75, said a soldier came to her house and ordered her and her mother onto the back of a truck, which was

crowded with dozens of other people. Like her, most of them were Jews.

“That day all soldiers on the streets were drunk,” she said. “The truck was driving us around for a long time, making circles. We finally stopped at the former theater building. We went in and took seats as if we had been waiting for a play to begin.”

People had their identities checked and were separated into two lines, she said. One line was allowed to return home, but the rest were taken to an area of the Danube known locally as the Strand, where they were shot.

Mrs. Volcevic and her mother were allowed to go home.

Artur Rozenstein, a former resident of Novi Sad who now lives in Budapest, was 6 years old at the time and was among those designated to be executed.

“We were led to the shore and stood in a large group,” he said. “I remember my father holding me in his arms and watching as this big group of people, about 100 meters away, kept falling down. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized they were being shot.”

He said an order came to cease the executions before it was his family’s turn. Two years later, 14 members of his family were deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and were killed there, he said. His father died during a forced march to a labor camp; he and his mother went into hiding in Budapest.

A memorial on the river bank marks where most of the people were killed. The inscription reads, “Memory is a monument harder than stone.”

None of the witnesses interviewed were able to cite Mr. Kepiro’s involvement in the killings.

Questioned about his role in the massacre by reporters in Budapest on Thursday, Mr. Kepiro said he was a lieutenant in the paramilitary police at the time, and denied taking an active part in the executions.

“We had a list of people who had to be identified by us,” Mr. Kepiro said. “It was given by a committee which was dealing with the identification of people.” Soldiers, he said, and not members of the police, were responsible for the killings. He also said he had refused orders to take part in anything illegal.

“I was the only one who asked for a written command. At the time of the massacre I was reluctant,” he said. “Prove that I was a war criminal.”

The 1944 court verdict, handed out by the Wiesenthal Center on Thursday, also refers to Mr. Kepiro’s request for written orders, but said he cooperated with his commanders despite the fact that none were given.

“To my mind he is a moral monster,” said Mr. Zuroff of the Wiesenthal Center. “All he was concerned about was covering his own back.”

Tamas Kovacs, a leading expert on war crimes in Hungary, said it was unlikely that Mr. Kepiro did not know the people he was rounding up were destined to be shot. “It was a planned operation by the gendarmerie and the army. I can hardly believe he didn’t know what was happening there.”

A prominent Hungarian historian, Krisztian Ungvari, said that it would be difficult after so much time to prove Mr. Kepiro’s guilt, and that it was unlikely that there would be much will to prosecute the case.

“We are talking about someone who is accused of having command responsibility, but this is very difficult to prove so many years after the event,” he said. “Prosecutors also have to take into consideration that this man is 92. There are many more people who are more dangerous to citizens, so people won’t understand why he is being prosecuted.”

Such suggestions anger Mr. Zuroff, who said Mr. Kepiro should face justice no matter his age.

“Trust me, from tomorrow, Sandor Kepiro will do everything to look as sick and unfortunate as possible,” he said. “So if you see him with a limp or sitting in a wheelchair, just take a minute and think back to the victims of 1942.”

*Nicholas Wood reported from Budapest and Ivana Sekularac from Novi Sad, Serbia.*

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