

The unusual beginnings of a pastor's life. In memory of Bishop Lajos Gulácsy, born 100 years ago

Ibolya I. Szamborovszky-Nagy

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education

PhD. (History), Associate Professor (Ukraine)

e-mail: szamborovszkyne.nagy.ibolya@kmf.org.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5978-1196>

Gabor J. Lanyi

Karoli Gaspar University of the Reformed Church in Hungary

PhD. (Theology), Dr. habil., Associate Professor (Hungary)

email: lanyi.gabor@kre.hu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6512-6681>

Abstract.

The purpose of this research is to present, in chronological order, the early life and formative years of Lajos Gulácsy, former bishop of the Reformed Church District of Transcarpathia, specifically focusing on the period preceding his formal pastoral ministry. Chronologically, this encompasses the time from his initial involvement in missionary work up to the commencement of his service as an ordained pastor. **The research methodology** is based on a combination of general scientific and specialized historical methods. Given the under-researched nature of the topic and the formulated objectives, a comprehensive search for primary sources was conducted. This included not only archival documents but also the bishop's own recollections, an interview with his wife, and contemporary publications. **The scientific novelty** of the study lies in its detailed reconstruction of the first half of Bishop Gulácsy's life based on the uncovered sources – an era that proved decisive in shaping the motivations behind his episcopal activity following the political transition. From this perspective, no prior study has examined the life path of the most prominent figure in the revitalization period of the Transcarpathian Reformed Church. **In conclusions** it can be stated that Lajos Gulácsy followed a truly unconventional life path before he was able to don the clerical robe. From a historical perspective, his life clearly reflects how the trajectory of Lajos Gulácsy's life was shaped and redirected by the events of the Second World War. Initially, Gulácsy planned to pursue a technical career, for which he obtained formal qualifications. Later he began working at a factory that, at the time, was considered highly prestigious and could have offered him opportunities for advancement. His memoirs and the events of the time vividly illustrate the chaotic circumstances of the postwar transition and the personal responses they elicited (he was unable to continue his technical career and eventually chose the pastoral vocation). It is also evident how the redrawing of state borders under the new regime affected his private life – he was unable to pursue institutional theological training and had to settle for spiritual instruction available locally. Furthermore, the anti-religious and dictatorial nature of Soviet rule also left a profound mark on his life, as he spent seven years in various forced labor camps in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: domestic mission, Eastern Friendship Circle, Lajos Gulácsy, Munkacheve/Munkács, post-war transition, revival movement, Transcarpathian Reformed Church.

Початок незвичайного життєвого шляху одного священника. До 100-річчя з дня народження реформатського єпископа Людвіга Гулачі

Іболя Самборовскі-Нодь

Закарпатський угорський інститут ім. Ференца Ракоці II

PhD (Угорщина), кандидат історичних наук, доцент (Україна)

email: szamborovszkyne.nagy.ibolya@kmf.org.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5978-1196>

Габор Янош Ланьї

Університет реформатської церкви імені Каролі Гаспара в Угорщині:

доктор філософії в галузі теології, доктор хабілітований, доцент (Угорщина)

email: lanyi.gabor@kre.hu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6512-6681>

Анотація.

Метою статті було розкрити в хронологічній послідовності той період життя реформатського єпископа Людвіга Гулачі, який передував його безпосередній пастирській діяльності. Цей період охоплює час від залучення його до місіонерської роботи і до початку діяльності в якості священника. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на поєднанні загальнонаукових та спеціально-історичних методів. Зважаючи на невивченість теми та сформульовані завдання, здійснено пошук первинних джерел, що означає використання не тільки архівних документів, але й спогадів єпископа, інтерв'ю з його дружиною, а також публікації того часу. **Наукова новизна** роботи полягає в тому, що на основі опрацьованих джерел у ній вперше з максимальною деталізацією розкрито першу частину життя єпископа Людвіга Гулачі, яка згодом визначила рушійні засади його єпископської діяльності після 1991 року. У цьому контексті дослідження біографії найбільш значної постаті періоду відродження Закарпатської реформатської церкви наразі відсутні. **Висновки.** Встановлено, що життєвий шлях Людвіга Гулачі до того, як він став священником, склався незвичайно. В історичній перспективі яскраво простежується, як на життєві плани окремої особистості – Людвіга Гулачі – вплинула Друга світова війна, яка змінила первісні плани юнака, спрямувала їх в інший бік. З'ясовано, що спочатку Людвіг Гулачі мріяв стати інженером, отримав відповідну освіту. Згодом продовжив свою діяльність на одному з найпрестижніших заводів того часу, який міг стати місцем для чудової кар'єри. Спогади та записи того часу пластично передають перехідний хаотичний стан повоєнної доби та пошук власних відповідей на таку ситуацію (неможливість продовження кар'єри інженера, вибір душпастирського покликання). Також простежено, як на особисте життя молодої людини вплинула зміна кордонів, спричинена новою імперією – замість інституційної підготовки на священника залишилася тільки можливість навчання на місці. На життя єпископа Людвіга Гулачі наклав свій відбиток і диктаторський радянський режим з його антирелігійною політикою, внаслідок якої він був репресований і провів сім років у трудових таборах Казахстану.

Ключові слова: внутрішня місія, Закарпатська реформатська церква, «Коло східних друзів», Людвіг Гулачі, Мукачеве, післявоєнний перехід, рух пробудження.

Statement of the problem. Lajos Gulácsy served as the bishop of the Transcarpathian Reformed Church (TRC) between 1994 and 1998. This period marked a visible and tangible revitalization within the TRC, and consequently, his person, actions, and public expressions of faith elevated him to become perhaps the most widely recognized pastor from Transcarpathia within the Reformed community of the Carpathian Basin. However, despite his later prominence, relatively little is known about his life prior to his ordination as a pastor. This lack of biographical information constitutes the central focus and objective of the present research. While his activities following 1978 are well documented – both in the internal records of the TRC and through various contemporary publications – his earlier life remains obscure. We contend that a deeper understanding of the revitalization processes that emerged in the TRC during the late 1980s necessitates an exploration of the personal and formative experiences of one of its most dynamic and influential leaders, who would go on to serve as chief notary and ultimately bishop. Uncovering the motivations that shaped his life and ministry must therefore begin with a thorough investigation of his personal background and development.

Analysis of sources and recent researches. The subject matter (Protestants and/or Reformed Christians in the Soviet Union) has been relatively well researched. Among these studies, the works of P. Bondarchuk (Bondarchuk, 2019), Yu. Vilkhovy (Vilkhovy, 2002), V. Voynalovych (Voynalovych, 2005), and O. Lysenko (Lysenko, 1999) examine the relationship between these religious groups and the Soviet authorities in the post-World War II period. Certain aspects of the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia are discussed in the articles of Inna Sherstiuk (Sherstiuk, 2012), Ihor Salamaha (Salamaha, 2001), and Oksana Leshko (Leshko, 2002, 2003). However, research on the life and work of Lajos Gulácsy remains limited; to date, only two publications have attempted to present a comprehensive account. The first is a compilation based on documents selected by Gusztáv Fodor, published in 2017. This volume consists primarily of a curated selection of court documents from the Stalinist era, pertaining to Reformed pastors who were arrested and sentenced in politically motivated show trials. Each pastor, including Lajos Gulácsy, is presented with a brief biographical outline (Fodor, 2017). The second source is an online encyclopedia entry, authored by the present writer (Szamborovszkyné Nagy, 2023). To date, no scholarly work in the Ukrainian language has addressed the biographical reconstruction of the former bishop. The only known reference is a brief entry found in a biographical guide entitled *Who's Who in Transcarpathia* (Закарпаття, 2004, 207). Accordingly, this study aims to expand the available source base by incorporating a wide range of documents and source types. These include, among others, court records following Gulácsy's 1949 arrest (AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, vol.2258), later interviews with the pastor, as well as his

privately published autobiographical writings (Mélységből, 2009). However, these widely accessible documents primarily concern the period following his arrest and conviction, as well as his activities during the revitalization era of the Transcarpathian Reformed Church.

The purpose of the study to explore the early stages of the life of the late Reformed Bishop Lajos Gulácsy, from his involvement in missionary work to the beginning of his pastoral ministry (1978). In comparison to other ministers, Bishop Gulácsy's path to ordained ministry was relatively lengthy, as he was already over 50 years old when he was ordained. He became involved in various areas of missionary activity in his early twenties, for which he was sentenced to ten years of forced labor during the Stalinist era. It is our view that the motivations behind the work of the late pastor, chief notary, and later bishop can only be truly understood if his entire life journey is examined. In doing so, we may see how his diverse engagements contributed to his later active and credible ministry as a bishop.

Exposition of the Main Material. Lajos Gulácsy was born on January 8, 1925, in the village of Tivadarfalva (present-day Fedorove, Berehove District) as the seventh of eight surviving children of Lajos Gulácsy and Emma Nagy (Szabó/a, 2). His father worked for a long time as a conductor for the Hungarian State Railways, traveling the country, while his wife managed the family estate she had inherited. For many years, the family lived primarily on the father's railway salary, as the income from farming was largely used to repay the debt burden placed on the estate (Szabó/b, 2). After the change in sovereignty resulting from the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, his father left his job with the railway and became a farmer (Mélységből, 2009, 8). Despite this, due to his extensive travels and experiences, he was elected headman of Tivadarfalva and served as village judge for a considerable period.

Family roots, schools. As a child, young Lajos suffered from frequent illnesses and was a boy of small stature and weak constitution. Nevertheless, he helped significantly in the family's agricultural work alongside his siblings (Szabó/a, 10). The family primarily engaged in tobacco farming – a highly labor-intensive activity – which provided their livelihood. The Gulácsy children all participated in the work, though each was also given the opportunity to pursue education. Lajos completed his primary schooling (up to the seventh grade) in his home village (Szabó/a, 8), after which he enrolled in a vocational school specializing in metal and woodwork in Vynohradiv (in Hungarian: Nagyszőlös) (Fedinec, 2010, 127). Upon graduating at age 18, he worked as a mechanic in 1943 in the technical department of the Matyásföld (present-day district of Budapest, Hungary) Aircraft Factory Ltd., at a base for testing training aircraft.

As the Soviet-German front advanced westward, production in factories across Budapest was suspended. While the exact date is uncertain, Gulácsy returned to his parents' home in Tivadarfalva (present-day Fedorove) in the autumn of 1944. Based on his autobiography, this likely occurred around November, as he recounted hearing upon his return that local men were being recruited for three days of labor. Fearing detention, he left again a few days later for Hungary – specifically Debrecen (Mélységből, 2009, 8–9). There, he worked for approximately four months at the MÁV¹ Rolling Stock Repair Factory (wagon factory) (Czanik, 2010, 5), before returning to his home village in March 1945.

Involvement in missionary work and the revival movement. In that same year, 1944, a missionary pastor, József Pázsit, arrived in Tivadarfalva (Fodor, 2006, 805). At the beginning of 1945, after the front had passed and the Soviet military administration had deported the local Hungarian men, a mass spiritual awakening began among Reformed believers in Transcarpathia. This revival led to a significant increase in participation at evangelistic events, Bible studies, and worship services. Pastor Pázsit became an active preacher and servant in this revival movement. The 20-year-old Lajos Gulácsy also became involved in this process. He was deeply affected by the revival, which left a lasting and profound impression on him, as he realized the truth of the words: "*What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*" (Matthew 16:26). It was during this time that he received his calling, through the words of Matthew 6:19–20: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" As a result, he became a missionary assistant to Pastor Pázsit, as confirmed by a letter of commission issued by the Ugocsa district dean, Sándor Lajos, on May 3, 1945 (AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, d.2258, vol.15). Following this, and at the initiative of Pastor Zsigmond Simon, he began working for the Reformed Tract Mission (Fodor, 2017, 270).

The church leadership quickly recognized the value of the young Gulácsy's worldly experience and, between May and September 1945, sent him twice to Budapest to collect religious literature (AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, d.2258, t.1, vol.231–232, 250, 273). By this point, the young man had firmly decided that he wanted to serve the Lord. In the summer of 1945, he set out to enroll at the Reformed Theological Academy in Debrecen. It remains unknown whether he succeeded in this

¹ MÁV is the abbreviation for Hungarian State Railways in Hungarian.

endeavor that summer, as the agreement signed in Moscow on June 29, 1945, between the governments of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia – officially transferring Transcarpathia from Czechoslovakia to the Soviet Union – resulted in the western border of the region being closed the following day. As a result, the young man was unable to begin his theological studies.

To resolve this, the missionary pastors – who were also leading the revival movement – found a way for him to remain close to the Word of God. Beginning in the autumn of 1945, a form of training was organized locally in Transcarpathia, whereby he undertook assistant duties under a different pastor each month. Through this activity, he came into contact with nearly all the members of the so-called “Eastern Friendship Circle”, including Zsigmond Simon, Zoltán Kovács, József Kovács, József Zimányi, Barna Horkay, and István Györke. In the course of this work, Gulácsy completed the so-called “Preacher Training Course” led by the pastors of the Eastern Friendship Circle in Gecse in February 1946. In addition to his missionary duties, he also became involved in teaching religion and preparing youth for confirmation (AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, d.2258, t.1, vol.244–249).

In the spring of 1946, József Pázsit was transferred from Tivadarfalva to Mukachevo to serve as a missionary pastor alongside József Kovács, the local Reformed pastor (Fodor, 2016, 445). The young Gulácsy either followed him voluntarily or accompanied him at Pázsit’s invitation. It was at this time that he became a member of the Reformed Congregation of Mukachevo, while working as a lathe operator in the local railway workshop and residing in the home of Pastor Pázsit (Wittenberger, 2025). From then on, he also began to participate in religious conferences organized by the revival movement. In the summer of 1947, he began to assist Pastor József Kovács in spiritual work as an interim worker (AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, d.2258, t.1, vol.281). During one of his interrogations, following his arrest in October 1947, missionary pastor József Zimányi stated the following: “Lajos Gulácsy, who has completed his schooling, currently serves as a missionary assistant pastor under the authority of the ‘Eastern Brothers’ Club, visiting villages in the Transcarpathian region to spread their teachings” (Fodor, 2017, 155). It was also during this time, while living in Pastor Pázsit’s household, that Gulácsy met his future wife, Emma Ádám, the daughter of the Reformed cantor of Mukachevo (in Hungarian: Munkács).

Arrest, conviction, and life in a forced labor camp. In the Soviet Union, only individuals holding official certification from recognized educational institutions were legally permitted to conduct religious services. Since Lajos Gulácsy lacked such credentials, he was banned from all religious activities when, in the summer of 1948, the state began registering Reformed congregations and pastors in Transcarpathia (Mélységből, 2009, 16). His name came to the attention of the Berehove District Department of the Transcarpathian Regional Office of the Ministry of State Security during the interrogation of missionary pastor József Zimányi in 1947, who gave a detailed account of the mission school’s activities and named participants, including Gulácsy.

Following the convictions of pastors Zimányi and Horkay, authorities began gathering evidence against other members of the “Eastern Friendship Circle”, which by March 1949 had escalated into a series of widespread arrests (Szamborovszkyné Nagy, 2023, 162). Ironically, it was during this same period – Easter of spring 1949 (which fell in late March that year) – that Lajos Gulácsy and Emma Ádám had planned their church wedding ceremony. In a 2002 interview, Emma recalled the circumstances of her future husband’s arrest: “One day we heard that girls were being sent to work in Donbas. So we decided to move up the wedding. We held the civil ceremony in February and scheduled the church ceremony for Easter” (Olasz, 2002, 6). However, on April 19, Gulácsy – by then her husband in civil law – was arrested by the political police along with five others. Lajos Gulácsy later recalled: “They arrested me at the Reformed parsonage, just as I had returned from my fiancée’s home to my lodging” (Rózsás, 2000, 122).

Two weeks later, the cases against Gulácsy and his five co-defendants – Zoltán Kovács, István Asszonyi, István Györke, József Pázsit, and Béla Huszti – were consolidated by the head of the Transcarpathian Regional Directorate of the State Security Office. The charge against them read: “[They were] members of a religious, anti-Soviet, Hungarian nationalist organization – the ‘Eastern Brothers’ Club’ – who collectively carried out anti-Soviet activities in Transcarpathian Ukraine aimed at alienating youth from Soviet reality and removing them from the influence of Soviet ideology” (Fodor, 2017, 388).

Gulácsy was held in pretrial detention for two months in the Uzhhorod prison. “We visited him, brought packages, prayed for him because we were very worried,” his wife later recalled (Olasz, 2002, 6). On May 24, 1949, under Articles 54-10, Section 2, and 54-11 of the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR, he was sentenced to ten years in a corrective labor camp, with an additional penalty of five years’ loss of civil rights and confiscation of property (Fodor, 2017, 407).

He was then transferred from Uzhhorod (in Hungarian: Ungvár) to the distribution camp in Lviv, from which he managed to send only one message to Mukachevo. From there, he was sent to a construction camp in Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan (600 km southeast of Karaganda), where prisoners were building the Bogatyr copper-processing plant. Prisoners were permitted to send two official

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letters per year, addressed only to direct family members, which he sent to his wife Emma in Mukachevo. In addition, only one clandestine letter reached her, allowing them to maintain some form of communication. “He always encouraged me, saying he would return home and continue his service,” she recalled. “But there were times when I received no letters at all, because he was being held in solitary confinement” (Olasz, 2002, 6). Due to his physical frailty, Gulácsy was unable to endure the mining work to which he was initially assigned and soon became seriously weakened. He was then reassigned to the carpentry workshop, where he worked for two years (Mélységből, 2009, 29). This job gave him greater mobility and allowed packages to be sent to him: “We sent him a package each month – one month from me, the next from his parents. We hid Bible passages, photographs, or letters in a double-bottomed tin box. That’s how we kept in touch, but it wasn’t easy,” his wife recalled (Olasz, 2002, 6).

Later, he was transferred to the Kengir labor camp, a few kilometers northeast of Dzhezkazgan (Rózsás, 2000, 122), where he was eventually assigned to work according to his training, as a machine fitter (Mélységből, 2009, 35). From that point on, his imprisonment became more bearable: he was allowed to leave the camp for work but was still not permitted to return home. As correspondence with his wife became more frequent, she found some relief and began submitting clemency petitions to various Soviet authorities.

Lajos Gulácsy first recounted his experiences in the labor camps in 1991, in a presentation given in Mukachevo, and later published them in writing under the title *From the Depths to the Heights: A Testimony from the Past*. He described how he received and preserved his first camp Bible: “A man can endure more than iron. [...] I received a package from my parents; in it, there was a bag of cornmeal. A soldier inspecting the package opened it and felt something soft inside. He said, ‘Your mama sent you bacon.’ [...] When I opened it, I found not bacon but a soft-covered New Testament with the Psalms at the end. My joy and surprise were indescribable. We immediately divided it into four parts to prevent it from being found and confiscated. [...] From then on, we had a Bible. That portion was with me the night the camp was decimated [...], but I didn’t have to fully undress, so I hid it in the leg of my underwear. It was with me even in solitary confinement. I always had to hide it, or the smokers would have stolen it for cigarette paper. I read it by making a small hole in my blanket to let light through, then moving it to catch the light. Many people don’t know what a blessing it is to read the Bible – especially when you don’t even have to hide it” (Mélységből, 2009, 43–44).

This harsh and often humiliating experience forged strong bonds among believers from different Christian denominations in the camp. Bishop Gulácsy frequently recalled the Lord’s Supper held in a clay pit: “We celebrated holidays together. On Easter in 1954, hiding on the camp grounds in a clay-digging pit, we shared communion with Reformed, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Baptist, and Orthodox brothers. We had bread, and instead of wine, we used water. We believed in the Resurrection” (Mélységből, 2009, 37). These experiences remained deeply etched in Gulácsy’s memory, and until the end of his life, he maintained that the Master shapes us under all circumstances – and that it matters not what ritual we use to praise the Lord, but that we know Him. That is why he never forgot Viktor Duliskovics, a Greek Catholic priest who, like Gulácsy, was transferred from the Lviv distribution prison through Kyiv to the copper mine in Kengir-Dzhezkazgan, where he died of a gunshot wound to the abdomen during the suppression of the May 16, 1954 uprising on July 26.

After returning home from the forced labor camp. Lajos Gulácsy served seven years and three months of his ten-year sentence, and he was released by amnesty on May 4, 1956. His family knew in advance when he would arrive, as the young man sent a telegram to inform his wife. He returned to Mukachevo on May 16, 1956, and had already been home for some time when one of the numerous clemency petitions his wife had submitted received a response – ironically, informing her that her request had been denied, even though her husband was already back home (Olasz, 2002, 6).

Shortly after his return, on June 3, 1956, he finally led his wife to the altar. “It was a very modest, quiet ceremony, followed by a simple lunch” (Olasz, 2002, 6). The groom’s suit was something Lajos Gulácsy had brought all the way from Kazakhstan, purchased with his last two months’ wages, carefully packed and carried with the utmost care all the way to Mukachevo (Mélységből, 2009, 47), so he could stand worthily beside Emma, who had waited seven and a half years for him. Those seven years were indeed difficult for his wife, who was just twenty years old when her husband was taken away in 1949. For a long time, she was unable to find work, and despite applying to various places, she was repeatedly rejected due to her husband’s status as a political prisoner. Eventually, she was hired by the accounting office of the city hospital, and when her father was also arrested, she took over his role as cantor in the Reformed congregation of the city. Her family, meanwhile, was not at peace with her situation – perhaps out of concern for the young woman – as she later recalled: “My mother, relatives, and acquaintances tried to persuade me to get divorced, saying only trouble would come of it, and that it wouldn’t be good for him either. But I was unyielding. I couldn’t even imagine, nor did I ever consider, abandoning someone I loved, someone who had been unjustly convicted. I’ve always been a faithful type – if I start something, I like to see it through. That’s

how I was raised. They only tried to talk me out of the marriage because they feared for my life. My poor mother was desperate, thinking my life had been ruined, but I didn't think that way. I knew that if God allowed it, then I had to endure it with honor. [...] I felt joy that in the end, I waited it out – because there were others who waited in vain” (Olasz, 2002, 6).

According to his wife's recollections, “My husband came home poor, and for at least five or six years, we lived in real hardship. At first, he couldn't find work.” The young couple received a room in the house of her parents, but they lived in great difficulty, while her family continued to worry about her. Several months passed before Lajos Gulácsy was able to find employment as a machine fitter in the Mukachevo railway division, using the certificate he had received upon his release from the camp. Later, he worked in the woodworking section of the Mukachevo Sovkhoz auxiliary branch and eventually found employment as a machine fitter at the so-called iron factory in Mukachevo.

After his return, despite repeated requests, he was not granted permission to resume pastoral service, as he could not present an official certificate verifying his theological qualifications. The Soviet authorities only authorized Gulácsy in 1978 to complete his theological studies at home – during the tenure and with the encouragement of Bishop Béla Gencsy (1974) – within the informal training program adopted by the Berehove congregation (Szamborovszkyné Nagy, 2025, 350). In early 1979, he was finally able to take his delayed exams, and on February 16, 1979, he was ordained. He passed his final pastoral examination on November 25, 1981, in Berehove, though by that time he had already been serving as a full pastor for three years in villages across the Berehove district – Borzhava (in Hungarian: Borzsova), Vary (in Hungarian: Mezővári), Halabor (in Hungarian: Halábor), Mochola (in Hungarian: Macsola), Badalovo (in Hungarian: Badaló), and Gecha (in Hungarian: Mezőgecse). After three months of service, he was formally installed in the Vary (in Hungarian: Mezővári) congregation, while continuing to live with his family in Mukachevo.

In conclusion – based on the aforementioned – it can be stated that Lajos Gulácsy followed a truly unconventional life path before he was able to don the clerical robe. From a historical perspective, his life clearly reflects how the trajectory of an individual – Lajos Gulácsy – was shaped and redirected by the events of the Second World War. Initially, Gulácsy planned to pursue a technical career, for which he obtained formal qualifications. He subsequently began working at a factory that, at the time, was considered highly prestigious and could have offered him opportunities for advancement. His memoirs and the events of the time vividly illustrate the chaotic circumstances of the postwar transition and the personal responses they elicited (he was unable to continue his technical career and eventually chose the pastoral vocation). It is also evident how the redrawing of state borders under the new regime affected his private life – he was unable to pursue institutional theological training and had to settle for spiritual instruction available locally. Furthermore, the anti-religious and dictatorial nature of Soviet rule also left a profound mark on his life, as he spent seven years in various forced labor camps in Kazakhstan.

This winding journey – as Gulácsy himself often noted in various forms – undoubtedly contributed to the deepening of his commitment, the strengthening of his faith in God, and to his enduring conviction that the form of ritual used to worship the Lord matters little, as long as we know and follow Jesus.

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Lajos Gulácsy's ID photo (1943, at the beginning of his employment in Budapest)
(AUSBU ZO, f.r-2258, op.1, spr.248, d.2258, t.1, vol. 235)

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