

JÁNOS SALLAI

Major General Barna Kazai, soldier and pioneering leader
(The Commander of KLKF from 1967 through 1988)

From 1971 to 1988, every year on 20th August, the Hungarian public could see Major General Kazai, the commander of the Lajos Kossuth Military College (hereinafter KLKF), when he conducted the officers' graduation ceremony in Kossuth Square surrounded by cameras and spectators. His name was long intertwined with officer training as a commander. Over the decades, his commanding presence has become legendary among students and officers alike. His personal appearance on college grounds or his performance at events always commanded authority and respect. As a college student, I looked up to him from afar, and as a deputy company commander, I came into direct contact with him on several occasions, and my respect for him only grew. I attended his lectures when he spoke about the 1950s and 60s, and his immediacy was palpable at every moment of the lecture. I travelled on the suburban railway several times when he was on his way to his home in Budapest after working hours, and met him when he was already retired. The short but meaningful conversations made lasting impressions on me. I will always remember the conversation when, in 1984, as a young officer returning to the College, he welcomed me together with my Head of Department, and we parted with the promise that he would visit me at my company at an appropriate time, because he was interested in how I had managed to settle into life at the College after my work with the border patrol. (Little did I know that General Kazai had also commenced his career as a border guard.) A month later, I was therefore quite surprised when the College Commandant appeared at the entrance of the company and asked the duty officer directly about me, and then sat down to talk to me in my office after the usual military formalities. His direct questions convinced me that it wasn't formal obligation why he was visit-

ing the company and me, but was genuinely interested in what was happening at the company, and how I was feeling, and also whether I had managed to fit in.

The abovementioned motivated me to create a fan page on Facebook a few years ago to commemorate General Kazai. The reactions of former colleagues and students, the comments, and reactions from followers confirmed my belief that the memory of Major General Barna Kazai, the general and the legendary commander of KLKF, should be preserved in some form, whether it be a statue or a memorial plaque. I found many partners in this endeavour, whose selfless donations have resulted in a memorial plaque on the entrance wall of the former KLKF command centre building, which now commemorates the General Kazai. Thus, former Kossuth students who visit the *alma mater* in Szentendre for a reunion can see the plaque remembering their former commander. The memorial plaque does not make up for the absence of military honours, but it is still a sign that we respect and do not forget our former commander.

In addition to the above, I believe for those who still hold him in high esteem as a role model it is important to learn more about the life and career of General Kazai.

Barna Kazai was born on 12 December 1929 in Mezónagymihály, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. One of his two brothers died as a soldier in the Second World War, and he also had two sisters. His hometown is located in the present-day Borsodi Mezőség Landscape Protection Area along Kácsi Stream, bordered by open flat countryside. This determined that the people living here basically lived from agriculture, so Barna Kazai's parents also led a peasant lifestyle, they were farmhands until 1941, and then they farmed a 6-acre small-scale farm in Mezőcsát.

During his first studies, he completed 5 grades in elementary school, and 4 in state civil school, then again 3 grades in secondary school after his voluntary enlistment in the People's Army on 9 April 1946. His military career began in a border guard unit in Sátoraljaújhely, from where he was posted to a border guard station in Pácin. In 1946-47, he was given training

first in Miskolc and then in Szerencs, where he became a non-commissioned officer and a squad leader.

In 1947, as was typical of the professional political life of the time, he became involved in political and cultural life and did cultural and agitation work in the villages around Miskolc, and later became a member of the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP). After the known historical events, he joined MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) in 1957.

1947 brought the opportunity for Barna Kazai to become an officer when he entered the Kossuth Academy, which he graduated from in 1949¹ and was promoted to second lieutenant. Three decades later, Barna Kazai, then a general and commander of the college, recalled the circumstances of the time and his motivation. *"I was drafted with minority enlistment in 1946, when I was only 16 years old. It was a mixture of childhood longings and many other things. It may seem cliché today to say that in those years all the doors were open to working-class and poor peasant children, but then we were stunned with joy. I had barely crossed the threshold of adulthood, and I, the son of a poor peasant, was asked the question: 'Do you want to be an officer in the People's Army? Now, in retrospect, I can search for words, but I cannot tell you how I felt. Anyone who were enlisted at the time, if asked, will say something that is broadly true, but to today's ear the words and adjectives sound a bit dull, they are perhaps a little rhetoric. It was a different age, and one had to live in it to describe it..."*²

¹ *"And the long-awaited day arrived, 14 March 1949, the day of the graduation ceremony. Masses of workers' and peasants' children were awarded the rank of officer for the first time in our country. It was also the day when General István Oláh, Lieutenant General József Pacsek, Major General Barna Kazai (emphasis added, SJ) and Colonel József Szabó began their officer career. We lined up in front of the bust of Kossuth in the garden of the academy, dressed from head to toe in beautiful new uniforms. The ceremony was attended by the top leaders of the Party and the government. There were parents and relatives. It was an unforgettable day! Our happiness knew no bounds. We took an oath of office to defend the power of the working people, and the majority of us kept it honourably for a lifetime."* Kollár Lajos (1984): A Kossuth Akadémián. Honvédségi Szemle 1984/5, 62

² 30 Years of Officer Training. Same Destinies in the Same Row. In: Néphadsereg, 1977. 30/27, 11

After graduation, he was appointed junior officer in Szekszárd and became a rifleman and armoured platoon commander, a position he held for only a short time. From there he continued his professional career in military training, and then in officer training. In 1949, he returned to Kossuth Academy for a few months, where he became a platoon commander in the subdivision command course, and from there he was transferred to the Dózsa Rifle Officer School in Pécs where he was appointed to the position of a student platoon commander, as it was called at the time, a position he held until 1 October 1951.

1951 was also a turning point in Barna Kazai's family life, when he got married.

In 1952, after completing the Dózsa Rifle School, he moved up the career ladder again, and was appointed to the Directorate of the Military Training Institutes of the Army as a Head of Department. 1952-53 found Barna Kazai back in the classroom, where he completed a one-year Higher Command Staff Course at the Defence Academy, and subsequently served as a Corps Commanding Officer in the Operations Division of the Chief of Staff's Operations Group Headquarters. He carried out his duties to the satisfaction of his superiors, the best proof of which is that in 1956 he was given permission to start the preparatory course at the Frunze Academy, the next stage of which was the M. V. Frunze Military Academy in Moscow, Soviet Union. Here he studied from August 1956 to 28 October 1956. For the sake of accuracy and authenticity, I present the period that followed³, quoting from Barna Kazai's autobiography of 1962. According to the autobiography: *"On 28 October 1956 we were brought home in a Soviet military plane. On October 28 and 29, we were at the Soviet air force division in Debrecen, because the plane landed there and we could not immediately continue our journey to Budapest. On 30 October we arrived at Budaörs airport on a Hungarian military plane. From the airport we were*

³ See also: Sallai, J. (2017): 1956 viharában - Janza Károly altábornagy [In the storm of 1956 - Lieutenant General Károly Janza]. In: Csurgai Horváth, József (Ed.): 1956: a szabadság narratívái : tanulmányok az 1956. évi forradalom és szabadságharc 60. évfordulóján

taken to the National Air Defence Command (OLP). On 30 October from the afternoon hours of 31 October we drove to the General Staff Operational Directorate (VK.Hdm.Csf). Until 3 November, I was in the Operations Department of the Operational Directorate as operations officer, but I was not given any specific tasks. In the morning of November 4, the Soviet soldiers sent us home from the Ministry of Defence (HM). From 4 to 6 November 1956 I was in my service family accommodation in Budapest (V. Balaton utca 17. III/3).⁴

On the morning of November 7, 1956, I went to the Ministry, and took part in the reorganization of the General Staff Operational Directorate in establishing liaison with the troops, and in clarifying the situation of the military at that time. I helped to clarify the situation regarding several units. Several corps were issued orders to organize their personnel, restore order in the barracks, and contact the Soviet troops. It was during these days that the organization of the public force began, and I participated in this process as an operations officer in the Operations Department of the General Staff Operational Directorate.

After the 1956 revolution, Barna Kazai returned to the Frunze preparatory course, then to the Academy in Moscow and graduated from the M. V. Frunze Military Academy in 1961. During his studies here, he learned Russian well. After returning home, he remained without a post for a short time, after which he was appointed Chief of Staff of the Division in Békéscsaba in 1961 and then in Zalaegerszeg in 1963, a post he held until 1966. During this time he participated in the "Vltava" exercise in Czechoslovakia. During this period, he published several scientific publications, all related to motorised infantry tactics and training. According to the evaluation of his duties as the division's chief of staff: *"He is able to use what he has learned at school in practical life, which was especially evident in the command of the division and in the cooperation team exercise held in the spring of 1962, where he greatly helped the commander's work with his correct suggestions*

⁴ Kazai, B. (1962): *Önéletrajz* [Autobiography]. Békéscsaba. Ministry of Defence Archives

*and actions towards the troops.*⁵ In the same evaluation, it is written of his dress and character: *"He dresses meticulously. His whole appearance and manner is cultured. His character is straightforward and firm, and he is determined to carry out his ideas and orders to the utmost.*"⁶ I believe the latter statements accompanied him throughout his career, and he was always characterised by his uprightness and exemplary appearance, as well as his regular dress code. In the reminiscences of former college students, Major General Barna Kazai was clearly the model general, the model soldier.

1966 was the defining year of Barna Kazai's career, when he was promoted to colonel in the Hungarian Defence Forces.

After that, his life was fundamentally shaped by his appointment to the Unified Officers' School (ETI), where he became deputy commander, and then to the newly created KLKF⁷ as a college commander. In recognition of his services to officer training, he was promoted to the rank of major general by HM Order No. 1855 of 7 November 1973. His summary of service (dates of rank) is as follows:

1. 1949 junior second lieutenant
2. 1949 second lieutenant
3. 1951 first lieutenant
4. 1952 captain
5. 1956 major
6. 1961 lieutenant colonel

⁵ Hungarian People's Army, Commissioned Officer Basic Evaluation 1963: Lt. Col. Barna Kazai. Chief of Staff of Motorised Rifle Division. Ministry of Defence Archives

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Order 18/1967. of the Minister of Defence made arrangements for the establishment of the school, for the future fate of the permanent staff, bases and materials of the disbanded Unified Officers' School and for the transfer of the cadets already enrolled in the school to the college." Füzesi, Ottó (2012): Felderítő tisztképzés a Kossuth Lajos Katonai Főiskolán [Reconnaissance Officer Training at the Lajos Kossuth Military College]. In: *Hadtudományi Szemle* 5/2. 20

7. 1966 colonel
8. 1973 major general.

Knowing the waiting periods in the ranks in socialism, it can be noted that Barna Kazai's promotions were always exceptional, which is the greatest recognition of his work. Furthermore, in 2002, in recognition of his performance as a college commander, he was awarded the PRO MILITUM ARTIBUS (for military science) medal, for the following reasons, in recognition of his achievements in officer training: *"As college commander, he has made an unparalleled contribution to the organisation of quality training for officers in the combat arms and combined arms over two decades, and also to the professional and training of young officers to the devotion of duty."*⁸ In my opinion, the successful work of Major General Barna Kazai, Commander of the KLKF, is best illustrated by the fact that hundreds and thousands of young officers who graduated from the college served in the Hungarian People's Army, later in the Hungarian Defence Forces, the Border Guard and the Police, and there are still, although fewer and fewer, officers serving today who studied at the College during his time.

Barna Kazai's work for the town of Szentendre was recognised by the town council with the *"Pro Urbe"* award in 1978, and with the title of honorary citizen in 1988⁹. His dedication to public affairs is shown by the fact

⁸ Source: <https://www.uni-nke.hu/document/uni-nke-hu/PMA.pdf>
Accessed 11.07.2023

⁹ The reason given by the municipality: *"a military institution commanded by the major general works in full agreement with the people of Szentendre. Some 5,000 students can pursue sports in the various sports sections and clubs of the college. Many of these students have gained reputation beyond the national borders. The conscripts and officers, under the leadership of Barna Kazai since 1968, fought alongside the people of Szentendre in the difficult days of the town. Floods, building dams, providing food supplies in difficult winters are the hallmarks of this friendship. The students of KLKF have created millions of forints worth of social work. Just a few of the most notable activities: building a bridge on the Little Danube branch on Pap Island, Dezső Mészáros Statue Park, beautification and landscaping of schools and institutions. The college opened its swimming pool to the youth leaders in Szentendre and its cultural centre to all. The people of Szentendre have*

that he was the president of the Hungarian Modern Pentathlon Association for several decades.

His academic activities, in addition to his work as a commander, are attested by several scientific publications, and interviews on officer training. Among these (a non-exhaustive list), the following main articles appeared in the scientific journals of the People's Army:

- Let's Increase the Speed of Columns: Honvédségi Szemle 1962 – Special issue;
- Anxiety and Fear in Combat (co-authored with Zoltán Vladár): Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, 1973;
- Experiences and Tasks of Guidance into the Professional Military Career: Honvédségi Szemle. 1975/12
- The Role of Education in the Training of Military College Cadets as Future Commanders: Honvédelem, 1971/10
- Self-Activity – the Leverage of Achievements and Results. In Honvédségi Szemle 1962. 3
- Attacks by Motorised Rifle Units. In Honvédségi Szemle 1962/6
- NCOs, the Primary Helpers of Officers. In Honvédségi Szemle 1962/11
- Anti-Tank Warfare in Modern Combat. In Honvédségi Szemle 1963/5
- On the Combat Activities of Rifle Units. In Honvédségi Szemle 1963/12
- Better Technical Knowledge for Our New Principles. In Honvédségi Szemle 1964/3
- Conference on Military Tactics. In Honvédségi Szemle 1978/7

The officers' graduation ceremony on 20 August 1988 was the last official public appearance for Major General Barna Kazai as a commanding

always felt the college their own place. And Barna Kazai' has a decisive impact to make this happen." Pest Megyei Hírlap, 1988. 32/ 304. 1

officer. On reaching the maximum age for service, pursuant to Article 5 (1) and Article 7 (2) of the Decree No. 10 of 1971 of the Presidential Council, he officially retired from service by order 01207 of the Minister of Defence effective as of 1 December 1988, and at the same time he was granted a 45-year of service award. After his retirement, he returned to the KLKF several times for retirement reunions, but in the 1990s he lived in the privacy of his family. Major General Barna Kazai passed away on 27 April 2007, his funeral with full military honours did not take place at the request of his family.

To conclude, here is a quote from Major General Barna Kazai, with decades of leadership experience: *"Don't feel infallible," he warned, "Good leadership is not a matter of rank, but of knowledge, of constant thinking, of the will to do something."*¹⁰

In addition to the above thoughts, the memory of Major General Barna Kazai is preserved in the "Kazai" classroom at the Faculty of Military Sciences and Officer Training of the National University of Public Service, so even today all military cadets can see Kazai's portrait and read his autobiography on the classroom's picture boards, and non-commissioned cadets can see the former college commander's memorial plaque at the entrance of the former KLKF command building in Szentendre.

¹⁰ Néphadsereg, 1987. 40/44. 7