

A society portraitist who emigrated to Britain from Hungary found himself embroiled in a drama of divided loyalties during the First World War. *Giles MacDonogh*

# TO FRAME A PAINTER

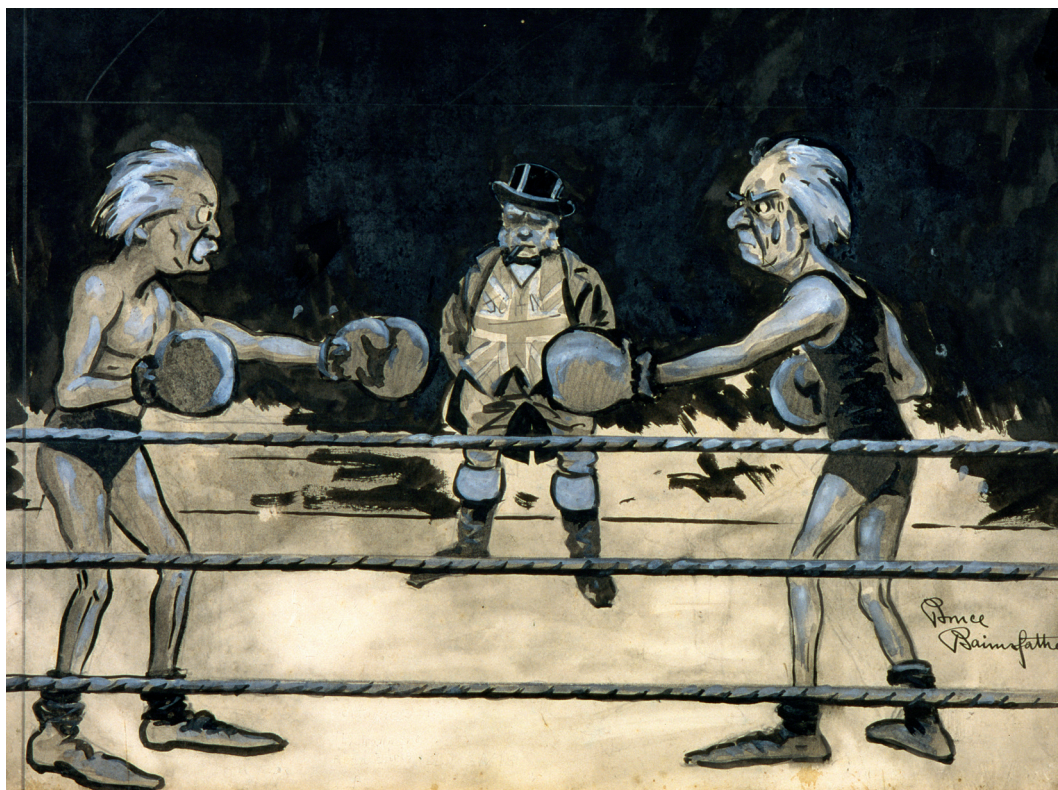






**Above:** Philip de László painting Lloyd George in 1931.

**Previous spread:**  
*Self-portrait with Wife and Son*, inscribed 'Finished this trio portrait of us on the 27th of Sept. 1918 in the days of distress and hope for happier times to come'. By Philip de László, 1918.



**Asquith (right) and Lloyd George in a boxing ring, with John Bull as referee. Illustration by Bruce Bairnsfather, c.1915.**

**T**he 'spy fever' generated by the First World War placed many of Europe's immigrant communities under suspicion. In Berlin, the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 was marked by lawless demonstrations against foreigners: the British Embassy was attacked, British subjects were locked up in Spandau and a great 'spy excitement' resulted in rumours about the poisoning of wells and lakes.

Germany had a tenth the number of aliens as Britain, where most Germans, Austrians and Hungarians were shopkeepers or tradesmen. Suspicion in Britain fell on those who made good listeners, such as prostitutes or hairdressers. Publicans and barmen might also pick up stories. A painter with a clientele as illustrious as Philip de László's was bound to come under suspicion.

De László, the son of a Jewish tailor, was born Fülöp Laub in Budapest in 1869. By dint of hard work and talent he had been admitted to Hungary's National Academy of Arts and later studied in Munich and Paris. Once he had converted to Catholicism and 'Magyarised' his name, commissions rolled in: from the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria to Pope Leo XIII, Edward VII to Kaiser Wilhelm II. In Munich in 1892 he had met and fallen in love with Lucy Guinness, from the banking side of the wealthy Irish protestant family, who he married, after some opposition, in 1900 (lingering doubts about his status within the Guinness family were dispelled by his elevation to the hereditary Hungarian nobility in 1912). De László converted to Anglicanism in the Legation Chapel in Vienna and, in 1907, put down roots in London. He needed a bigger stage for his talents and there was a stylistic





De László, with his family and brother-in-law, Howard Rundell Guinness, under house

arrest at the home of his solicitor, Sir Charles Russell, 1919.

reason for his affinity with Britain: as Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi*, pointed out, his influences had evolved from the English portraitist George Romney to the man who perfected the form, Thomas Gainsborough.

As war with Germany and its ally, Austria-Hungary, grew closer, de László needed to become a British subject; there was a particular urgency, as his eldest son would have otherwise been liable for service in the Austro-Hungarian army. Papers were drawn up hastily on 21 July 1914 and he signed the oath of allegiance on 2 September, almost a month after Britain's entry. The former prime minister, Arthur Balfour, stood proxy.

The news was not well received in his former homeland. News of de László's naturalisation was reported by the Hungarian journalist József Szebenyei and in November the conservative Budapest daily *Hirlap* called for

de László's expulsion from the nobility, which was eventually acted upon.

### Hostile voices

On 7 May 1915, a German U-boat sank the RMS *Lusitania* off the south-west coast of Ireland on its way to Liverpool from New York, killing 1,198 passengers and crew. De László joined a delegation of his former countrymen to protest against the sinking against a background of rising xenophobia. Opportunistic organs of the Northcliffe press, including *The Times*, called for internment of aliens, while Horatio Bottomley's popular jingoistic newspaper *John Bull* urged that naturalised aliens, of whom there were around 9,000, should be confined indoors, their children banished from schools and their property taken away for the duration. The Liberal Prime Minister Asquith stood his



De László in his London studio, 1937.

ground: 'If a man is a British subject with the legal rights of a British subject, the *prima facie* presumption is that he is going to perform his duty.' But by May 1916, as the war became mired in bloody stalemate, naturalised Britons of enemy origin were subject to closer observation by the authorities. The Home Office was well aware of how jumpy people had become about aliens and spies. On top of the losses on the Western Front and in the Dardanelles, the Germans had begun using poison gas against British troops. A Yorkshireman denounced to the police because he had a 'funny accent' was far from an isolated incident.

The agents directed to deal with the clampdown on aliens were led by Basil Thomson and Vernon Kell. Thomson was in charge of Special Branch, while Kell led the freshly established MI5, which dealt with

matters of state security. There was a rivalry between Kell the army officer and Thomson the policeman, but Kell needed Thomson because otherwise he had no power to arrest suspects.

### Revealing contacts

Thomson, concerned about Germany's promotion of pacifism, found some of de László's contacts revealing. Frederick Hankinson was a Unitarian Minister in Kentish Town who had been close to the suffragettes. The Unitarians were an important presence in Hungary and young Hungarians lodged at his house were introduced to de László. The painter's friend William Hechler was also suspect: half-German, he had been Anglican chaplain in Vienna and was a staunch Zionist.

De László was concerned for his family in Budapest, who depended on him for financial



support. At the beginning of the conflict, he was unable to access his bank account in Vienna and had to find another means of providing for their needs. This account and his investments were later sequestered. John Loudon, the Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs in London, suggested he use the Dutch diplomatic bag. His sister Adrienne van Riemsdijk, who had sat for de László, would be the intermediary. The Dutch were a risky choice, for they were considered pro-German and closely monitored. All post to the Netherlands was censored, but the involvement of the Dutch foreign minister at least validated the transfer of funds.

A postcard from van Riemsdijk to de László was intercepted on 18 June 1916, which revealed his use of the diplomatic bag. On 24 July, MI5 asked to see his naturalisation certificate. His sponsors would have left MI5 in no doubt as to the prestige of his contacts but they continued to monitor his correspondence. The following day, a campaign backed by the Northcliffe press forced Asquith to resign in favour of Lloyd George. 'Haldaneism', the policy of leniency towards aliens associated with the Lord Chancellor Richard Haldane, was dead.

### **Ratchet tightened**

The case against de László became more serious when, on 7 July 1917, MI5 received a report from the French central bureau for Allied intelligence that concerned a diplomatic passport-holder called 'Madame G', possibly at the Swiss Legation, who was also using the Dutch diplomatic bag to deliver information to the Austrians. On 12 July a Dutch subject informed the Austrian secret service that he or she was getting information from de László.

MI5 was aware of who was going in and out of de László's studio. Had they considered any of these individuals a danger to the realm they would have been arrested or interned by now. On 17 July, however, de László committed another act of imprudence. A Hungarian reserve officer, Árpád Horn, escaped from Donington Hall prisoner of war camp on 16 July. The next day he called on de László at his studio and said he had no money and was staying at the Golden Cross Hotel in Trafalgar Square. According to de László's own testimony he gave Horn £1 for food, but his conscience

began to prick and 25 hours later (he should have reported the case within 24 hours) he went to the police and admitted giving Horn money. He had also told Horn of other Hungarians who might have been helpful. The testimony is confused and not very convincing but he was able to inform the police that Horn was staying at the Golden Cross. Fortunately for de László, his tip-off led to Horn's arrest.

In an intercepted communication of 24 July, it was claimed by 'Madame G' that de László was in contact with Wilhelm von Einem, the Austro-Hungarian military attaché in Berne, who was 'principally concerned with pacifist propaganda'. The source for these revelations is presumed to have been an Italian raid on von Einem's office, from which a letter said to be addressed to de László talks of 'days when we were both bursting with youth' (it later transpired the correspondence was in Hungarian) and promises him the 'restoration of his Hungarian nationality on the basis of services rendered'. The deal was that he should reveal details of the treatment of German POWs in France and refers to a report of 13 June which gave a 'true picture of England'. It also warned 'don't mention Madame G in your letters any more'.

The report attributed to de László revealed British maritime losses and mine production; that the king wanted the war to end; and that Alsace-Lorraine was not worth fighting for. It also suggested that de László was desperate to have his Hungarian nationality restored and that he had already sent in nearly 40 reports. De László was a converted Jew with a wide social circle that included an entrée to the pope and to the British and German courts. 'Hence he has a number of enemies, who made his life impossible in Hungary.' There was a note in the file saying that there was no doubt that de László received the letter. In another communication, addressed to the German Legation dated 16 July, 'Madame G' is named as 'Frau Gomperz' and is asked to tell de László to cease his activities because, according to the letter, de László 'had the feeling of being watched'.

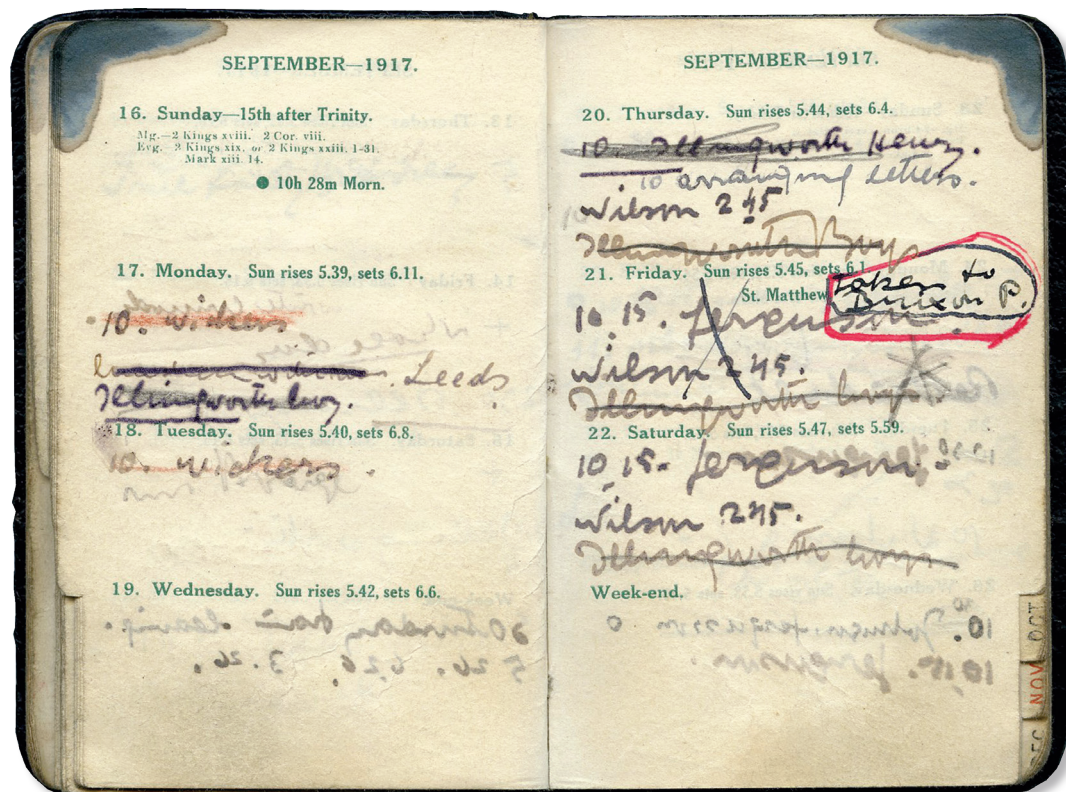
### **Unlikely stories**

Was one of de László's enemies seeking to frame him? Or was it MI5? If the reports really were written by de László, the revelation is



Sketches and material  
from the artist's time at  
Brixton Prison, 1917.





Diary entries made by de László during his time in Brixton Prison.

a bombshell, but it is hard to imagine where he might have gleaned information relating to mine production, shipping losses or even the true state of Britain. If he was getting it from his sitters, they were equally culpable by divulging military secrets to a naturalised British subject of enemy origin.

De László was taken into custody and interrogated by Thomson on 15 August 1917. Did he want Britain and her allies to win the war, he was asked. Did he still feel Hungarian, or was he now more British? De László admitted to doubts. He wanted to be admired in his homeland and was quite candid about his correspondence through the Dutch diplomatic bag. When asked about 'Madame G', he thought it might be someone in the *corps diplomatique*. They coaxed him, telling him that this person was of 'Jewish extraction'.

The fact that de László was born of Jewish

parents obsessed Thomson: 'I want to ask you one personal question which might throw some light on this. As a matter of fact is yours a Magyar family, or was it originally Hebrew?' De László's reply is honest enough: 'Originally Hebrew, always living in Hungary.' Many at the time saw Jews as being devoid of national loyalties or patriotic feelings. The idea of a 'Jewish world conspiracy' had been hatched in Tsarist Russia before the war and was to grow in the immediate postwar years with the aid of the literary forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In Thomson's eyes, de László's ethnicity made him more likely to be a traitor. Many others pursued by Britain's intelligence services at the time were also born Jews.

#### Lack of evidence

Towards the end of the interview, de László said something that was uncharacteristically

direct: he told Thomson he would never find anything in his own hand alluding to the conduct of the war. This seems to have been true, for if Thomson really had the evidence to convict de László of espionage he would hardly have allowed such an important spy to return – as he did – to his rented summer lodgings at Churchmead House near Windsor.

Two weeks later, on 29 August, de László was interrogated for a second time, when Vernon Kell sat in. Many of the questions were simply refinements of those asked a fortnight before, though de László was plainly affected when Thomson read a cutting from the Hungarian newspaper the *Star*, which quoted the artist reflecting on his naturalisation: 'It cost me severe mental conflict but on account of my five sons I had to do it.' Thomson put it again that de László had a 'divided allegiance' and argued that he should have divested himself of his foreign title – though for a man of de László's background to be able to call himself 'László de Lombos' and transmit the title to his sons was a huge achievement. It would not have been an easy honour to relinquish.

MI5 had found a packet of cuttings and accused de László of having assembled them. They featured 'air raids, sinking of a cruiser, revolution in Russia, trouble in Greece, peace pamphlets etc'. Thomson wanted to know why de László had kept these. It transpired that the cuttings had been given by 'Old Professor Hechler'. Thomson believed that Hechler was seditious: 'Is he a socialist?' he asked, though Hechler had taught the children of the Duke of Teck, presumably including Britain's present Queen Mary. 'He goes to all kinds of meetings', de László replied. Thomson also raised the name of Baron Otto von Schleinitz, living in London, who had written a book about de László. Von Schleinitz had died in 1916 but his widow and daughter still visited and brought him German newspapers. Hankinson was also sending him material of the same sort and probably socialist and pacifist pamphlets.

'I am in an awful position in my studio', de László admitted. 'I see so many people and one talks.' De László's 'babbling' while he painted was now being scrutinised. The MI5 agents had been interviewing his sitters. One revealed that de László had said it was 'the supreme moment to Great Britain to make peace ... that she had

got all she wanted ... If the Russians had stood firm they would have come in like a wedge between her and her eastern powers.' He had talked about the war to *The Times* correspondent Colonel Repington, who admired his work (though one wonders what other form of small talk would have been appropriate with Repington?). De László said, quite understandably, that he could not hate Hungary; that Hungary did not start the war and that he hoped Hungary would become free of Austria.

### Kell's report

After the second interrogation Kell wrote a report to the Home Secretary recommending that de László be interned. Kell maintained that the elusive 'Madame G' was in England. The Austrian secret services in Switzerland 'were receiving information from a Dutch subject who, in turn, received information from de László, stated by them to be a person who moved in official English circles'. In July one of Thomson's agents obtained a copy of a translation of a letter written by a Hungarian representative in Switzerland to de László, which encouraged him to believe that he would regain Hungarian nationality: 'He is thanked for the numerous and valuable reports which he has sent from England to Hungary since the war started, through the medium of some person in Holland, and that he is evidently regarded by the writer as a valuable and trustworthy Hungarian agent in this country.' De László, it seems, was considered suspect because he wanted Austria-Hungary to stop fighting. It is hard to imagine why this should have worried the British authorities. The desertion of their allies would have made it more difficult for the Germans to continue. The mysterious 'Madame G' was never traced.

Kell added an unsympathetic biography of de László to his report: he was the 'son of a Jew tailor', his brother was 'an Austrian Jew tailor', his money was safe in an Austrian bank (untrue). Kell says he had an annual income of £12,000 and about £32,000 invested. De László believed the Russians, and not the Kaiser, started the war. He helped Hungarian internees (that was true, but largely with alms). He was connected with the 'notorious' Frederick Lawrence Rawson – a Christian Scientist and suspected pacifist who said he had a method of guaranteeing the safe return of men sent to the trenches. Rawson was also under investigation and must have been





MI5 Christmas card from  
Vernon Kell, 1920.

linked to Hankinson. They clearly thought the Dutch diplomatic bag could have been used for important correspondence but lacked proof. As for the 'incriminating' letters from the military attaché in Berne, the French did not want their source to be exposed. A further letter seems to point to de László being a disseminator of pacifist propaganda.

If MI5 could not intern de László for pacifism and divided loyalties they at least had a good chance of convincing the authorities that he had abused the diplomatic bag. This constituted secret contact with the enemy. It was a far less significant charge than was sought by MI5, but de László was clearly guilty on this count and he was sent to Brixton Prison on 21 September 1917. In some ways it was remarkable that he had managed to avoid internment for nearly three years.

### Minor offences

Kell's report had failed to convince the judicial committee reviewing his internment that de László was a spy and it quashed MI5's evidence on the following grounds: there was no proof that incriminating letters ever reached de László; even if the original correspondence was presented 'it might have been fraudulently prepared ... by someone who desired to sow the seeds of discord between England and France and took this very clever and adroit way of doing it'. The judgment was neither half-hearted nor lenient. As they put it: 'It goes without saying that, if the contents of the letter are true, László's punishment ought not to be internment but the severest penalty which the law can inflict.' But there was 'no object proof' and there were 'no very strong grounds for suspicion'. Replying to a question in the Commons, the Home Secretary Sir George Cave said there was 'no legal evidence' that de László was a spy. His loose tongue was the main case against him: 'No member of the committee is desirous of internment of an artist of international standing for any length of time if it can possibly be avoided.'

The attitude towards aliens in Britain was more bitter than ever. On 11 July 1918 the *Evening News* announced that it was 'enemy alien week'; a rally was held in Trafalgar Square at which placards read 'intern them all'. George V was furious in his response, saying that he, too, should be interned as his blood

was German. On 24 August a massive petition was prepared and delivered to Downing Street. Vigilante groups hunted for German spies.

Negative attitudes to naturalised Britons in no way altered with the cessation of hostilities in November 1918. An editorial in *John Bull* demanded to know what MI5 had unearthed on de László, and its editor, Horatio Bottomley, challenged de László to sue for libel. De László's case was debated in the House of Lords on 28 May 1919, when some of this was ascribed to 'artistic jealousy'. On 29 July, after the satisfactory termination of the Denaturalisation Tribunal, the Home Secretary, Sir Edward Shortt, had proclaimed the harmlessness of de László and stressed that the earlier investigation and the tribunal had been convened for different reasons.

While the intelligence services believed that de László was a dangerous man, they still had no 'smoking gun', even if he was – in their opinion – 'a deliberate and cynical agent of an enemy power acting as both a source of important high-level intelligence and of peace propaganda, spreading ill will towards Britain's allies and undermining the morale of his important clients among Britain's elite'.

The prosecution's case before the Denaturalisation Committee was flawed. They could not provide the 'French evidence' – the two letters that claimed to prove de László was a spy – without permission. Half of de László's correspondence had disappeared from the MI5 file, much to de László's advantage, and two prosecution witnesses no longer wished to give evidence.

De László's hearing took place on 23 June 1919 and the verdict was delivered five days later. The Attorney General Sir Gordon Hewart appeared for the prosecution, together with Sir Archibald Bodkin and G.A.H. Brandon. De László's defence team consisted of the former Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, Harold Murphy and John Wylie. The three-man committee took just 15 minutes to throw out the case.

### Climate of the time

De László first came under suspicion because he made use of the Dutch diplomatic bag, something that was of questionable legality. It is possible that others were using the bag and that their reasons for doing so were less





**Above: Attorney General Sir Gordon Hewart, later as Lord Chief Justice, c.1930.**



**Right: Horatio Bottomley, editor of *John Bull*, c.1920.**

innocent. De László also gave money to an escaped Hungarian prisoner of war and failed to report the matter to the authorities for more than the required 24 hours.

Both these actions and the fact that he continued ‘communicating with the enemy’ after he had been warned not to would normally have resulted in internment, given the climate of the time. These two illegal or quasi-illegal acts led MI5 to investigate his affairs. They discovered that the man who had come to Britain at the age of 38 had, unsurprisingly, divided loyalties and interpreted the origins of the conflict as a person of Hungarian background might. They also learned that he had dealings with pacifists and muddleheads who had brought him the sort of newspaper cuttings that might be read in any neutral country. MI5 wanted to construct a more serious case against him from

that moment on and claimed to have the proof. If that was the case it was never produced and they never managed to convince the legal authorities that de László had one to answer. It may be that they fabricated evidence, or that someone else did. They may have been worried that the documents they had would backfire on them if they came under proper scrutiny. None of the names thrown up by the enquiry pointed to a single serious player in the world of espionage. De László was just one of the many naturalised British subjects who fell victim to the spy fever that rampaged through the streets of Britain during the First World War. He was simply better connected than most.

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Giles MacDonogh is a historian of modern Germany. His books include *On Germany* (Hurst, 2018) and *Prussia: the Perversion of an Idea* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).



Portrait of Sir John Simon,  
by de László, 1919.

**Further reading**

- Duff Hart-Davis, *Philip de László: His Life and Art* (Yale, 2010)
- Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1939)