



## “Abu Ramla”: László Almásy’s Short Biography<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

László Ede Almásy, to whom the Bedouins deservedly bestowed the name “Abu Ramla” meaning “Father of Sand”, was one of the most famous Hungarian explorers of Africa and the Sahara. Beyond that, he was a professional car racer and pilot. Throughout his expeditions he gained world fame. Many books and several films have been devoted posthumously to his adventurous life. Almásy mapped countless previously unknown parts of the desert and rediscovered the Oasis of Zerzura, known from legends. Furthermore, at the rock spring of Ain Dua in the Uweinat Mountains, he found prehistoric cave paintings whose significance rivals the paintings of the Altamira and Minateda caves. Despite his success, he faced many difficulties during his life such as financial problems and participation in two World Wars. Due to his service in *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (German Africa Corps), proceedings were brought against him by the People’s Court. The aim of this study is to give a brief overview of László Almásy’s fascinating biography, focusing on the years he spent in Africa.

### Keywords:

Africa, László Almásy, Egypt, Sahara, Magyarabs, World War

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## Introduction

László Ede Almásy, world-famous Hungarian researcher and explorer of Africa dedicated his entire life to desert research. Almásy became almost one with the desert. He was excellent at reading tracks, and he was able to navigate himself easily even in the midst of the endless seas of sand. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Bedouins gave him the moniker "Abu Ramla", meaning “Father of Sand”. He believed that the “*infinity of the desert cleanses the body and the soul*” and that only here can one truly feel “*unshakable faith in the Being above us*” (ALMÁSY, 1934. p. 15). Almásy was an excellent pilot, scout, and car racer. As a young man, he took part in the First World War and the ensuing *coup d'état*<sup>3</sup>, before setting off on expeditions to Africa and making maps of the undiscovered regions of the Sahara. The Egyptian Royal Family not only financially supported him, but also maintained a friendly relationship with him. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Almásy served in the army under the leadership of General Erwin Rommel, commander of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*. As a result, at the end of the fighting, Almásy was brought before the judges of the People's Court. Although he had made his country proud with his expeditions, he had to flee from his homeland at the end of his life.

In my study, I would like to briefly present László Almásy's life's journey, which was full of unexpected and exciting twists and turns. First, I will describe the pivotal moments of Almásy's childhood, the years leading up to his trip to Africa, his car expeditions, and his work as a flight instructor. Then, I will discuss his most important discoveries in Africa, focusing on the Oasis of Zorzura, the prehistoric cave paintings he explored, and his encounter with the Magyars. Finally, I offer the reader a glimpse of Abu Ramla's adventures during the Second World War and the criminal proceedings brought against him at the People's Court.

## His Childhood

László Ede Almásy, the famous explorer of Africa and the Sahara, was born on August 22, 1895, in Borostyánkő, Hungary<sup>4</sup>, on his family's noble estate, as the second child of György Almásy and Ilona Pittoni.<sup>5</sup> His origin and family background had a significant impact on his later career. His grandfather, Eduárd Almásy, was one of the founding members of the Hungarian Geographical Society, established in 1872. He was a well-travelled and cultured man, interested in travel, geographical discoveries, and geography. He liked to collect travelogues, regularly subscribed to German geographic journals, and always purchased the most up-to-date maps and atlases. His private library

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<sup>3</sup> It was the attempt of King Charles IV of Hungary to regain his throne in 1921.

<sup>4</sup> Borostyánkő (in German: Bernstein) could be found in Burgenland (In Hungarian: Őrvidék) region in Austria.

<sup>5</sup> Ilona Pittoni came from an Italian noble family from Dalmatia.



contained over five thousand volumes, including around half a thousand books on geography, astronomy, meteorology, and geology. Thanks to Eduárd's passion for geography, he became a close friend of such well-known Hungarian travellers as Ármin Vámbéry, János Xantus, János Hunfalvy and Ottó Herman.

“Mr. Laci<sup>6</sup>” spent a considerable amount of time in his grandfather’s library as a child, and despite his tender age, read scientific books there with great enthusiasm. His father, György Almásy, was an Asia-researcher, as well as a zoological and ethnographic collector, who often made ornithological observations in his spare time. From Kyrgyzstan, he brought numerous ethnographic objects, trophies, and stuffed birds to the family castle. His love of birds also had a great influence on László. Later, it encouraged him to make ornithological observations just as his father did, and probably also this was the source of his interest in flying. (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 21–33).

Almásy completed his primary education at the Borostyánkő Folk School. As he was a private pupil, he only had to visit the educational institution personally when he took his exams. At that time, his governess, Ágnes Mayer, helped him with his studies. Studying together paid off. According to his 1902 school certificate, the boy achieved excellent results in almost all subjects. He excelled in language learning too. Since he spoke mostly German with his mother, and also had a French governess for a time, his language skills could improve rapidly. Moreover, he often conversed in Russian with his father's guests. In the course of his later career, he mastered several dialects of the Arabic language to a high level. (Nemes, 2018, p. 44). He continued his studies at the Benedictine High School in Kőszeg, considered a particularly prestigious institution at that time. Most of his teachers were members of the Order of Saint Benedict of Pannonhalma. The high school organised several excursions and encouraged pupils to join the National Youth Bird Protection League. Every year, the teachers made a school festival to mark Birds and Trees Day, which was unusual in the country at the time. The nature-friendly attitude of the institution deepened Almásy's love for birds even more. However, his school results began to deteriorate. In 1909, he failed among other things in Latin, quantity theory, drawing and geometry, and thus brought shame to the family. Subsequently, he decided to continue his studies in Graz (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 33–56).

Flying occupied him more than his studies. At the age of fourteen, he built a homemade glider, and jumped off the edge of a quarry. However, the attempt went awry, and he fell ten meters into a stone pit. Although he broke his ribs and suffered other minor injuries, this did not discourage him, and he became even more interested in aviation than before. However, he soon had to leave Graz, as he accidentally hit the school principal with his bicycle, causing a huge scandal. During his studies in Graz, his health began to deteriorate drastically due to heavy smoking. Thus, in 1910, his parents sent him to Arosa, Switzerland, to live in a lung sanatorium for a year. Nevertheless, he could not quit smoking in Switzerland either. The family wanted László to learn to speak

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<sup>6</sup> His governesses usually called him like that when he was a child.

English fluently, so they enrolled him in a technical training in Eastbourne, England. He studied there from 1911 until the outbreak of the First World War, but unfortunately, he was unable to complete his training due to the war. It was here that he became acquainted with the books of Frederick Selous<sup>7</sup> and Joseph Rudyard Kipling<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the British Museum’s rich Egyptian collection drew his attention to desert research. Besides, Almásy, whom his British friends called “Teddy”, encountered the scout movement here, of which he later became an important representative (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 33–56).

### *His Life Before Going to Africa*

László Almásy’s final years before his trip to Africa were shaped by three main components: The First World War, the ensuing *coup d’état*, and the scouting movement. Although these elements may seem completely different at first glance, there are many connections among them. All three factors came into Almásy’s life through the contribution of the Roman Catholic bishop, Count János Mikes.

At the outbreak of the Great War, Almásy was only nineteen years old. Thanks to his studies in England, he was aware of the Entente’s military superiority, yet he enlisted as a volunteer soldier and remained loyal to the Central Powers. (BFL XXV. 1.a 3501. 1946. pp. 13-14.) "*As a rookie soldier, he enthusiastically participated in the fights and won many awards, including first- and second-class silver valour medals and bronze valour medals*" (Kubassek, 2018, p. 59). He was first sent to the Eastern, then to the Italian front. In the second place, he became infected with malaria in 1916 and, as a result of this illness, he met Bishop János Mikes<sup>9</sup>, who personally visited soldiers on the battlefield and spent much time in field hospitals providing spiritual support and religious advice to the wounded. Although King Charles IV and Queen Zita offered him the bishopric of Veszprém, which would have brought him greater prestige and income, Count János Mikes refused it because he did not want to leave his beloved Szombathely.

After the end of the war, Almásy faced with many difficulties. On the one hand, he was forced to interrupt his studies because of the fighting. On the other hand, he suffered from financial problems. As he was only the family’s second son, his brother János inherited the family’s property and the estate’s income. László and his sister Georgina received only a monthly contribution from their brother, leaving them financially vulnerable. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that, following the Treaty of Versailles, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy disintegrated and Borostyánkő, Almásy’s hometown, became part of Austria. Then Bishop Mikes asked László to become his private secretary. To fulfil his duties, he relocated to the bishop’s palace in

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Selous was a well-known British explorer and Africa researcher.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Rudyard Kipling was a famous English writer and poet who won Nobel Prize for literature. He was the author of the novel, called “The Jungle Book”.

<sup>9</sup> In 1939 János Mikes was appointed as titular archbishop by the Pope.



Szombathely, which soon became one of the main centres for the organisation of the royal *coup*.

King Charles' idea was to “*address a proclamation from Szombathely to the people of the country and announce that he will begin to seize the royal power. He thought that Szombathely will be the royal centre, from where he would firstly consolidate his power in Transdanubia, and then gradually extend it to the entire country*” (Kubassek, 2018, p. 81). However, the bishop did not support the king's idea, believing that the royal declaration would divide the nation and could provoke civil war, as not everyone had legitimist sentiments in Hungary. He, therefore, suggested that His Majesty should travel to Budapest and negotiate about the peaceful transfer of power with Governor Miklós Horthy.

Almásy accidentally found himself in the political spotlight when, as a driver, he accompanied the last Habsburg monarch to Buda Castle at the end of March 1921. Nonetheless, Horthy refused to voluntarily relinquish power, as he believed that, neither the Entente nor the neighbouring countries would accept the king's claim to the throne, and he did not want to take the possible risk of a war. Thus, after the failed attempt, Charles IV was forced to return to Szombathely.

Almásy recalled his meeting with the monarch as the following: “*When His Majesty was in Szombathely in 1921, I was assigned to be his assistant, and during that time the King - remembering the submission he had written down - consistently addressed me as a count, and this continued in the legitimist circles of that time, and it also came up in the press. You can imagine, how often my brother and I find ourselves in the situation of protesting against the title of count, which many people insist on to satisfy their own vanity*” (Nemes, 2018, p. 110). It can therefore be said that the non-existent title of Count Almásy entered the public consciousness thanks to Charles IV, even if Almásy never actually held the rank.

Although Almásy did not play a key role in the planning of the royal coup, as a legitimist he supported the restoration of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a result, he became politically unreliable in the eyes of those in power and could no longer enjoy the sympathy of the political elite. Due to his financial difficulties, he was unable to follow the monarch to Switzerland, where His Majesty was exiled. After the failure of the *coup d'état*, Almásy found himself alone and had to look for other solutions. In the end, he came to the conclusion that it would be better to leave the country, so he returned to England for a short time (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 70–98).

After his return to Hungary, he turned his attention to scouting. The scouting movement was closely linked to the church. The characteristics of the true scouting spirit included the religious and moral foundation, loyalty to the king, patriotism, willingness to help, community thinking and the love of nature. It rejected all extremist ideologies, including Nazism and Bolshevism. All these ideas were clearly reflected in Almásy's way of thinking. Bishop Mikes generously supported the Hungarian scouts with his donations

and was asked to be the figurehead of the National Association of Hungarian Scout Parents and Friends. In the holy year of 1925, thanks to his help, the Szombathely scouts were also able to travel to Rome, where they took with them a flag inaugurated by Queen Zita, which was then solemnly blessed by Pope Pius XI. From that year onwards, Bishop Mikes also organised an annual scout camp in Répceszentgyörgy. Almásy became one of the leaders of the scout movement in Vas County and, in May 1921, was elected an officer of the Hungarian Scout Association. He published several articles in the magazine titled ‘Cserkészfiú’ (*Boy Scout*). He tried to use the international connections he had acquired in England to the country’s benefit. Thanks to his diplomatic relations, the Hungarian Scout Association was accepted as a member of the International Scout Association in 1922 (Kapiller, 2013). Nevertheless, his most important scouting-related activity was the preparation of the 1933 World Scout Meeting in Gödöllő. At the Gödöllő jamboree, Almásy represented the “Rákóczi team 48”, founded in 1920. (Kasza, 1995, pp. 90–98).

In conclusion, Almásy’s life was full of adventures in the last few years, before he travelled to Africa for the first time. He gained a copious amount of experience, which proved useful for his research. He was also able to make the most of the new circle of acquaintances he had built up during this time.

### *His Love for Driving Cars and Planes*

László Almásy was interested in automobiles and airplanes from a very young age. Thereby, he was extremely happy when he received a mandate in 1922 from the Austrian company, called Steyr to sell the company's cars. Although he immediately accepted the offer, at the same time he remained the private secretary of Bishop Mikes. Fortunately, his financial problems were seemed to be temporarily solved.

With the support of Steyr Company, he reached Africa for the first time in 1926, when he and his brother-in-law, Antal Eszterházy went to an exploration by using one of the cars of the company. Originally, Eszterházy came up with the spontaneous idea to go to Sudan together for hunting, while they were skiing. Firstly, they went to Alexandria by ship, then they hired firearms in Cairo. Here they finalised their itinerary, according to which they will travel along the Nile by car to Aswan, from where they will continue to sail by steam barge to Wadi Halfa. After that, they will cross the Nubian desert, then drive to Khartoum on the right bank of the Nile, and from there going to the Dinder area<sup>10</sup>, where they can start hunting (Mohamed, 2015, p. 91). Before starting the tour, Almásy obtained a letter of recommendation from the Egyptian Minister of Transport, so the use of roads, bridges and railway lines became available to them without any difficulty. The trip was by no means without danger. They got into sandstorms several times, and the car often got stuck among the large sand dunes. The

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<sup>10</sup> The Dinder is the tributary of the Blue Nile.



distance between Wadi Halfa and Khartoum was about 1,300 kilometres. Almásy and Eszterházy hoped that the Steyr car they were driving would be the first vehicle that would be able to cross the barren sand and rock world of the Nubian and Berber deserts. Their expectations were fulfilled, because they indeed became the first people, who crossed the above-mentioned deserts by car. Finally, the two men reached the valley of the River Dinder in safety. The expedition triggered a great press response in Hungary, and the incident was also reported in the Arabic newspapers. That was the time when the Egyptian elite became aware of Almásy's name for the first time. Almásy donated some of the wild animals he had hunted in Sudan as a trophy to the Savaria Museum of Szombathely (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 99–112). Almásy commented on his first visit to Africa as the following: *“We did not intend to achieve some record performance when we decided on our trip to Egypt. Actually, we had no idea about it, and I confess, we didn't really care about how far we could go forward by the car. The fact that later we included Sudan in our itinerary, and we were the first who accomplished the nearly 3,000-kilometres long journey, came about almost by accident, completely by itself”* (Nemes, 2018, p. 166).

In 1927 Almásy successfully completed an approximately seven hundred kilometres long test driving between the valley of the Nile and the Bahariya Oasis by using one of the vehicles of the company. Taking advantage of Almásy's newly acquired reputation, in the same year, Steyr commissioned him to represent the company in Cairo. They hoped that in this way they could create a market for themselves in Egypt too (Mohamed, 2015, p. 91). Almásy represented the Steyr factory with several cars at the international automobile exhibition, held in Cairo and won many car races under the name of the company. He took part in lots of discovery trips and hunting expeditions with the company vehicles. He received financial support from aristocrats, who were interested in exotic hunting, and in order to create the inevitable financial background for his trips, Bishop János Mikes also lent him a large amount of money.

In 1928, Almásy organised a hunting expedition around the watershed of the White Nile, and in 1929 he set off on a car discovery trip to the Eastern Sahara. Prince Ferdinand von Lichtenstein, Anthony Brunner and Rudi Mayer accompanied him on the latter trip. *“At Almásy's suggestion, they were the first to cross the swamp world<sup>11</sup> of South Sudan, called as Sud, which was believed to be impassable by car”* (Kubassek, 2018, p. 133). The local inhabitants encountered Europeans at the first time when Almásy and his travelling companions appeared on their previously untouched land. In addition, the participants of the Almásy-Lichtenstein expedition were also involved in other adventurous situations during the discovery trip. For example, they were once captured by the Nuers<sup>12</sup>, from whom they could only manage to escape by using tricks. Almásy somehow persuaded them to stand in a circle and hold the car's ignition cable. While the capturers were hit by the electric shock, the explorers quickly escaped. The

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<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, this area is called Badigeru Swamp.

<sup>12</sup> The Nuers are an ethnic group from South Sudan. Their members are mostly shepherds.

most memorable section of the trip involving East Africa, Sudan and Egypt was the Wadi Halfa–Selima Oasis–Kharga road section. In the Libyan desert, between the Selima Sand Plain and the Kharga Oasis, there was an abandoned ancient caravan route that connected Central Africa to Egypt. This part of the road was also called as the journey of forty days<sup>13</sup> since the nearly two thousand kilometres long distance could be covered in the past about that amount of time. Due to the bad climatic circumstances and the poor travelling conditions, many slaves, and animals, intended for sale, had died in this area in the past. Therefore, the desert was full of the remains of human and animal bones. Almásy decided to continue here the last section of the journey with his companions. Starting from Wadi Halfa, they travelled approximately 1,400 kilometres. The rediscovery of Darb El Arba’in, which had been abandoned since the Mahdi uprising, brought enormous fame to Almásy in Egypt. (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 112–146). Finally, it is worth mentioning among his car trips, the hunting expedition he led in the Libyan desert in 1935, in which Count Zsigmond Széchenyi<sup>14</sup> and Jenő Horthy<sup>15</sup> also participated. During the hunting, started from Wadi Halfa, they were travelling along the Nile.

In 1930 as a result of the world economic crisis, Almásy was fired from the Steyr company, thus he started to suffer from financial difficulties again. Fortunately, his achievements regarding the mapping of the Libyan desert, attracted the attention of the Egyptian Royal Family, through which he could gain a significant social capital. He made friendship with the Egyptian prince, Kemal Din Hussein, and later he also developed a good relationship with King Farouk I. The Royal Family supported the explorer’s discovery quests with considerable financial assistance, which for instance made it possible for him to go on a camel expedition from Sudan to Abyssinia.

His passion for sports flying has accompanied Almásy since his childhood. His accident in the quarry did not stop him from flying and in 1914 he bought his first own airplane. In 1933, at the world scout meeting in Gödöllő, he tried to make young people familiar with flying, and he wrote his youth novel, called ‘Suhanó szárnyak’ (Sliding Wings) with the same purpose in 1936. Nevertheless, he could invest his talent to the greatest extent in Egypt, where at the request of Taher Pasha, he started to work on the establishment and organisation of a new flight school. By founding the Royal Egyptian Aero Club, Almásy laid the foundations of sport aviation in Egypt and became one of the most determining figures of this sport in the country. He earned sufficient income from airplane sales and flight trainings. He visited Europe several times on business trips and sometimes travelled home to Hungary as well. At home, he wrote studies on

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<sup>13</sup> In Arabic: Darb El Arba’in.

<sup>14</sup> Count Zsigmond Széchenyi was an outstanding figure of the Hungarian hunting culture. He made Hungary’s most important hunting book collection.

<sup>15</sup> Jenő Horthy was the brother of Governor Miklós Horthy. He wrote a book about his hunting experiences, which was published in 1937, under the title: “Egy élet sportja Vadászat-Lóverseny-Falka” (A Sport for Life: Hunting-Horse Race-Herd)





aviation to facilitate national defence training, and in the summer of 1938, he also worked at the training school of the Hungarian Aero Association in Esztergom as an instructor (KASZA, 1995, pp. 83–90). During one of his trips to Hungary, he gave an interview to the magazine, called *Esti Újság*. At first, the reporter asked Almásy about the Egyptian flight school, who reported that the institution accepted high school and university students who later could be trained as reserve pilots of the army. After that, he addressed appreciative words to the young people applying to the school, who have great ambitions and behave in a sportsmanlike manner during all circumstances. He mentioned that in Cairo they purchased new gliders from Hungary too. In 1937, for example, a plane called “Turul” was bought, with which an enthusiastic British officer in Egypt set a world record for a series of somersaults performed by an airplane at an altitude of three thousand meters. Finally, at the end of the conversation, Almásy praised the new Miklós Horthy National Aviation Fund. Based on his speech, he was filled with pride that even though Egypt was a richer state than Hungary, the latter still devoted a larger part of its budget on the development of aviation, due to the new measures (Góczán, 1938, p. 6). In 1939, László Almásy was chosen by the Hungarian government as one of the supervisors of the National Aviation Fund. At the request of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Almásy wanted to expand his aviation organising activity to Persia, but this could not take place because of the outbreak of the Second World War.

### *Investigating the Myth of Zerzura*

Zerzura is a mysterious oasis town, named after the desert wheatear.<sup>16</sup> The legend of the city was already known in the Middle Ages. Its name first appeared in the Arabs' medieval book of alchemy, called *Kitab al-Kanuz*.<sup>17</sup> In the eyes of researchers, this place was as much a legend as the mysterious golden kingdom of Eldorado, and its exact location remained unknown. It was László Almásy who decided to unravel the mystery of Zerzura and find out whether the place of the fairy tales exists at all, and if so, is it just a “ruined city or an oasis full of palm trees, flowing with milk and honey” (Almásy, 1934, p. 117).

Almásy began to research in order to reveal the mystery. He collected and translated all the Arabic, French, English, and German reports he could find about the lost oasis. Then he arranged the collected materials in chronological order to filter out the reality from the ocean of tales and establish his own theory (Almásy, 1934, pp. 119–120). He decided to use the airplane for his research. His plan to find the lost city from the air was considered frivolous by many and lots of people laughed at him. Despite this, he still had supporters. His enthusiastic friend, Count Nándor Zichy, decided to fly

<sup>16</sup> A small dark-winged bird.

<sup>17</sup> The meaning of *Kitab al Kanuz* is the Book of Pearls.

with him and financially support the expedition. Moreover, an English car expedition, which started its trip from Cairo and intended to reach Cape Colony, deviating from its own route, undertook to follow Almásy's plane from the ground for a few weeks (Almásy, 1934, p 12).

The Hungarian newspapers proudly reported that Almásy went to discover the lost paradise of the Sahara. Among others, such periodicals as the *Pesti Napló* (Pesti Napló, 1931, p. 4.) and *Az Est* (Az Est, 1931, p. 12) informed their readers in detail in their columns about the ideas regarding the journey. The papers also mentioned that Almásy firstly went to London, where he bought a second-hand sports plane. Then he flew to Hungary to pick up his travelling companion, Count Nándor Zichy, in Szombathely. The next day they arrived in Budapest at the Mátyásföld airport, in order to depart from the capital and reach Cairo through Constantinople (Pesti Napló, 1931, p. 4; Az Est, 1931, p. 12).

However, Almásy’s journey soon took a tragic turn. On 25 August 1931, their plane got stuck into a whirlwind above the cliffs of Taurus Mountains. After losing control over the vehicle, it started to move towards the mountain pass with an unbelievable speed. In his book, ‘Levegőben, homokon’ (In the Air, on the Sand), the explorer recalled the most terrifying scene of the accident as the following: *“Now we are indeed dancing with the death, the machine is creaking and vibrating in its every component, throwing itself from one side to another... We are inside the porch of hell. Sometimes the engine screams with crazy revolutions per minute, as the tortured propeller tries in vain to hold on to the air flow that is pushing us forward, sometimes it buckles as the weight of the plane, hanging almost vertically, puts pressure on it”* (Almásy, 1937, pp. 26–17).

Fortunately, they were able to implement an emergency landing near to Aleppo, Syria. Almásy freed himself from his squeezed position, then climbed out of the plane and made sure that Zichy was not seriously hurt. László's left hand was bleeding because a piece of wood stuck into its side. His leg was bruised where the gas tank pressed it, but he managed to escape the accident without suffering serious injuries. With its engine forward, the plane bored into the ground, broke to two pieces at its waist, but its wings remained intact (Almásy, 1937, p. 28). After the disaster in the air, Almásy started to work at the Egyptian Institute of Cartography and devoted all his energy to organise expeditions to the Sahara. Therefore, the mystery of Zerzura remained unsolved for the time being.

On 1 May 1932, while flying in the company of the Scottish lieutenant-colonel, Penderel, and following the flight of the birds, Almásy spotted a large oasis that had not yet appeared on his map. It soon became clear that the unknown oasis located halfway between Kufra and Dakhla was the long-lost oasis of Zerzura (Pesti Hírlap, 1932, p. 3).



Near the area, he also discovered the northern main valley of Gilf Kebir<sup>18</sup> sandstone plateau, called Wadi Abd el Malik<sup>19</sup>, then he found Wadi Talh and Wadi Hamra. Although he did not find an open surface spring or pool of water in Zerzura, he noticed that there were groups of salt cedars<sup>20</sup> in some places. The characteristic of these plants is that they can only survive in places where their roots reach the groundwater. Because of this, he was sure that after digging a meter or two he would find an underground water source (Pesti Hírlap, 1932, p. 4). In his book, called ‘Az ismeretlen Szahara’ (The Unknown Sahara), Almásy reported that the oasis was a disappointment to him, because he could not find any proof that this barren rock bed might have been inhabited in the past. Only the birds gave him some comfort, as he saw two beautiful eagles, a few hawks, and many small black and white birds.

The oasis got its name from the latter species, therefore László shot one as a proof (Almásy, 1934, p 140). After that he returned there once again, but the things he experienced there made him disappointed anew. Hoping to find the remains of an ancient prehistoric culture, he explored every little spot of the valley. However, he did not find any treasures, nor did he come across any traces of the lost army of Cambyses.<sup>21</sup> There were not even stone tools or ancient rock paintings in the former river valley. Almásy came to the conclusion that the legends similar to the Zerzura myth are born from the survival struggle of the nomads to whom, during their difficulties, the water resources and pastures of the oases are worth more than any other treasure (Almásy, 1934, pp. 143–145).

Despite the fact that, Almásy was not satisfied with what he experienced in the oasis, his discovery had huge significance and thus his name got a rightful place in the history of the most important geographical discoveries in Africa forever. Solving the myth of Zerzura had an extraordinary importance in the field of desert research and at the same time it also opened the way for the development of new transport routes. After Almásy's pioneering discovery, he was nicknamed Abu Ramla<sup>22</sup> by the locals. The discovery of the legendary oasis became possible because *“sport and mechanics, these two great cultural values, were united in Almásy, who has the blood of scholarly ancestors, whose nobility is not only manifested in family traditions, but also in the nobility of his way of thinking. The nobleness of his thinking, combined with his youthful energy, made it possible for Almásy to commit himself to serve goals that do not promote individual interests, but carry the interests of larger communities”* (Kubassek, 2018, p. 73).

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<sup>18</sup> The meaning of Gilf Kebir is Big Wall.

<sup>19</sup> The meaning of Wadi Abd el Malik is the Valley of the King's Slave.

<sup>20</sup> Salt cedar is also known as Tamarix.

<sup>21</sup> Cambyses was a Persian King, who reigned between 529-522 BCE. He occupied Egypt in 525 BCE.

<sup>22</sup> Its meaning is the “Father of Sand”.

### *Discovering Prehistoric Cave Paintings*

In early 1933, László Almásy, accompanied by the geographer László Kádár, set off on another expedition to the Gilf Kebir area. The aim of the expedition was to map the last unknown areas of the Libyan desert. Crossing the immense sandstone plateau seemed almost impossible, but in the caves of Gilf Kebir Almásy found unique rock paintings dating back to the Neolithic period. Almásy named the place Wadi Sura, meaning Valley of Pictures (Almásy, 1934, p. 200).

Almásy noticed a group of pictures of swimming people in one of the caves. This proved that there could be more or less permanent rivers suitable for swimming in the completely dry Sahara. In May 1933, the Africa researcher found further prehistoric human and animal depictions at the Ain Dua rock spring in the Uweinat Mountains. The engraved images also included animals once considered indigenous to the Libyan desert, such as antelopes, giraffes, elephants, and ostriches. Almásy concluded that these paintings were made either by nomads from Sudan who had already been familiar with these southern animals, or at a time when the Libyan territory was not yet deserted. According to the latter hypothesis, the drawings could date back several thousand years, since the climatic processes of this magnitude can only take place over thousands of years (Almásy, 1934, pp. 187–188). On May 12, Almásy found a cave above Ain Dua, containing approximately half a dozen paintings. They were about the same height as the surface of the lake could have been. The figures depicted were dark brown and with reddish-yellow hair. They held a short bow with a hooked end. On their shoulders, they carried a quiver with arrows on a white strap. Their hair was decorated with white feathers, and their bodies were embellished with white belts, arm, and leg ties. Among the animals, only cattle were represented, with four different horn shapes (Almásy, 1934, p. 196). In terms of value and integrity, this discovery rivalled the paintings in the Altamira and Minateda caves. As a result, the Uweinat Mountain soon became famous (Pesti Hírlap, 1933. p. 15).

The news of Abu Ramla’s discovery of prehistoric rock paintings in the heart of the Libyan desert spread rapidly through the scientific world. However, it also had its drawbacks. A few people tried to steal Almásy’s work and claim it as their own. Italian zoology professor, Lodovico Caporiacco, published Almásy’s research in his own language, and a year later, the German ethnographer, Leo Frobenius also wanted to appropriate the findings of the Hungarian explorer. However, the fraud became disclosed, and caused an international scandal. Overall, Almásy profited from the lack of professionalism of foreign researchers, as the affair earned him worldwide renown. Several articles were published about him and his research in the German, English, and Italian journals (Kubassek, 2018, p. 357).



### **Meeting with the Magyarabs**

Between 1934 and 1935, Abu Ramla attempted to map the vast plain in the middle of the Sahara, known as the Great Sand Sea. While buying petrol in Wadi Halfa and talking to the representative of the Shell company, he realised that the petrol deliveryman's name sounded peculiar. The light-skinned, eagle-nosed Arab man was called Ibrahim el-Magyar. Almásy, driven by curiosity, soon started to talk with him.

Ibrahim claimed to be from the “Magyar” tribe, and that he and his companions lived on an island, called Magyarab. His tribe originated in the distant land of Ruba (Europe), in the country of Nemza (Austria), from where their ancestors were taken as prisoners of war by Sultan Suleyman in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to serve as border guards against the Nubians. In the afternoon, Almásy visited the Island of Magyarab, where approximately three hundred people lived at the time. He immediately noticed that the inhabitants did not look like Berbers or the Sudanese Arabs. The tribesmen also said that their ancestors had married local Berber girls in Africa, whose language they learnt and spoke alongside Arabic. Although they could not speak Hungarian, the sense of the Hungarian origin was still strong in them. They knew that there were Hungarians living in Europe, whom they considered their brothers and sisters, and they looked forward to the moment when one of the Hungarians would visit them.

On the same day, the British governor received Almásy, who informed him of his interesting discovery. Almásy was astonished to learn that the governor not only knows about the tribe's existence but is even surprised that the famous Africa researcher had not heard of them until now.<sup>23</sup> The governor described the Magyarabs as good soldiers and loyal servants (Almásy, 1937, pp. 104–107). Nevertheless, Hungarian readers did not hear of this news until a few months later, in 1936, in the *Pesti Hírlap* report, and they greeted the story with great enthusiasm (*Pesti Hírlap*, 1936. p. 39).

### **With Rommel's Army in Libya**

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Africa in general - and Egypt in particular - became an important battlefield for both the Axis and Allied Powers. Italy's fascist dictator, Mussolini, had his sights set on the region, but the British Empire could not afford to lose the Suez Canal, as it was the principal link between them and their Asian colonies. As a result, even though Italian troops were outnumbered by five times, they suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Commonwealth forces in the February of 1941. Consequently, the Germans were forced to rush to Africa to help their ally.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>23</sup> The governor reflecting to Almásy's discovery, even joked about that if the origin of the Magyarabs had been revealed earlier, how the Wilsons would have received it at the Paris Peace Conference, if Hungary had submitted a territorial claim to the tiny island along the Nile.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, the annexation of Egypt was also in the interests of the Germans, since in addition to obtaining the Suez Canal - and the advantages inherent in it - access to the oil regions of the Middle East and the Caucasus would have become much easier for them.

war also brought serious changes to László Almásy’s life. The British chased him out of Egypt, forcing him to abandon his research for a while. He returned to Hungary, where he served as a pilot in the Royal Hungarian Air Force. On February 8, 1941, at the request of the Germans, under the leadership of the German *Wehrmacht*, he was transferred to the African front, where his expertise in desert research and aviation was much in demand (Kasza, 1995, pp. 99–122).

General Rommel was able to take advantage of Almásy’s service at the *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, where the Hungarian explorer first became an air force lieutenant, then a commissioned officer of cartographic aerial reconnaissance. In December, he was promoted to officer in the cartographic and geographical Luftwaffe’s office in Berlin, responsible for organising German intelligence activities. He set up Operation Salaam, with the aim of smuggling two German spies behind the British front lines. Almásy prepared the necessary things for the operation by himself (e.g., military equipment, radio sets, food, water tanks and aluminium ladders, used to prevent the car from getting stuck in sand pits). Moreover, he chose the navigation equipment to be used during the mission.

The action began on April 29, 1942, in Tripoli. Almásy then went to al-Agheila, and then to the fortress of Gialo, to smuggle the German intelligence officers, Johan Eppler and Hans Gerd Sandsted to British occupied Cairo. Almásy and his group, approaching from the west, heading to south, bypassed the immense sandstone plateau of Gilf Kebir. They pumped gasoline from the abandoned British vehicles, found along the way, and then sprinkled sand into their fuel tanks to render them unusable by the British. They easily overcame the initial navigational difficulties, and ten days after setting off, they reached the Kharga Oasis, where an Anglo-Egyptian military checkpoint was set up. Their clothes resembled those of the British soldiers, and to deceive the inspectors, they spoke to each other sometimes in Arabic, sometimes in English.

By the time the British realised the deception, Almásy and his companions had already gained an irreplaceable advantage. After their appearance in Kharga, the British immediately alerted the units of the Long Range Desert Group<sup>25</sup> and more than half a thousand patrols began to follow them. In the meantime, they reached the Japsa Pass and Almásy let the two spies continue their journey along the Nile, who then arrived the capital of Egypt by land, without encountering any difficulties (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 235–275).

Almásy’s return was even riskier. The enemy had already got wind of his presence, thus he could not play the same trick on them. He should have taken a detour, but a longer route was out of question due to the lack of fuel and water, so he had to find a third possibility. Fortunately, in his escape, he stumbled across a desert warehouse left unguarded by the British, from where he stocked up on water, food, and patrol. He

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<sup>25</sup> This was the name of the British desert patrol group.



planned to cross the rift valley, east from the entrance to Wadi Sura, the so-called Akaba Strait, which was laden with boulders and deep ravines. As it was virtually impossible to cross this area by vehicle, the British did not set up a garrison here, contenting themselves with place a few grenades at the entrance to the valley. Almásy deactivated some of these grenades and made his way over the pass.

After reaching the German lines, he went to the German headquarters, where he personally announced the success of the operation to Rommel. He was awarded the German Iron Cross for his heroism and promoted to reserve major in October. Although Operation Salaam ended successfully, Johann Eppler and Hans Gerd Sandstedt's luxurious lifestyle attracted too much attention, and the British soon exposed them (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 235–275).

In the October of 1942, Almásy was repatriated from the African front, and wrote a book about his experiences on the North African battlefield, titled 'Rommel seregénél Líbiában' (With Rommel's Army in Libya), which was published by Stadium Publishing Company in 1943. (BFL XXV. 1.a 3501. 1946. p. 28.) Under the Kállay government, his work received excellent reviews. The periodical, *Új Magyarország* wrote about it as the following: *"This book ranks among the finest works of the recent war literature. This time László Almásy, the explorer, is not talking to the reader as a sportsman or a scientist, but as a soldier: one of the many soldiers of the African battlefield"* (Dékány, 1943, p. 5).

The magazine, *Magyar Élet* also praised the work. It characterised the novel as unusual and original, because it is not built around large-scale war events and does not seek to make an impact by highlighting the horrors of war. The reader can almost experience with Almásy the life of the soldiers on the African battlefield. According to the newspaper, *"Besides the author's excellent observation skills, good humour and great love for Africa, his individual modesty and deep human understanding are reflected in every line of his diary"* (Magyar Élet, 1943. p. 8). Finally, in the journal, *Ruszinszkói – Kárpáti Magyar Hírlap* the book also received considerable praise, when it was compared to a perfect painting, every stroke of which can be admired, because it hides the beauty and values in its every single line (Ruszinszkói – Kárpáti Magyar Hírlap, 1943, p. 4.).

After the Second World War, the previously positive perception of the book changed radically. In 1945 it was added to the index of 'Fascist, anti-Soviet and anti-democratic press products' (Bálint et al., 1945, p. 1). The journals *Népszava* (MTI, 1945. p. 4) and *Magyar Közlöny* (Magyar Közlöny, 1945. pp. 6-9.) also classified it as a fascist and anti-Soviet book, and subsequently, during the court proceedings against Almásy, the prosecution tried to use the work as evidence against him.

### ***In front of the People's Court, Almásy László's Last Years***

During Almásy's absence, one of the neighbouring families moved into his apartment on Bartók Béla Street 29, whose members denounced the Sahara researcher with false accusations in order to seize his property forever (Kasza, 1995, pp. 129–134). As a result, the Soviet NKVD<sup>26</sup> and the Hungarian Political Police detained Almásy several times between April 1945 and February 1946 (Szabad Szó, 1946, p. 1; Délamerikai Magyarország, 1946. p. 2). In addition, in February 1946, criminal proceedings were brought against him by the People’s Court.

Even though Almásy fought on the side of the Germans, he was not a member of the Arrow Cross Party or any other right-wing organisation. On the contrary, he even helped to hide Jews at the time of the deportations. During his pre-trial detentions, he spent most of his time in the Markó Street Prison, in inhumane conditions. The overcrowded cells, which were unheated in winter, were full of bugs and smelled terrible due to the prisoners' limited toilet facilities. Vulnerability and insecurity mentally tormented the prisoners. Gyula Germanus, the world-renowned Hungarian orientalist and expert in Islamic cultural history, volunteered to testify on behalf of Almásy, whom he had met at al-Azhar University in Cairo. However, the People's Court rejected Germanus' application in the first round. The professor then paid a personal visit to Mátyás Rákosi, who had been one of his students at the Eastern Academy of Commerce. Following Rákosi's superior instructions, the People’s Court overturned its earlier decision and agreed that Gyula Germanus should be heard as a witness (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 283–306).

Almásy's interrogation at the People's Court began on November 16. During the trial, he defended himself by claiming that he did not join the German army but served in the Hungarian army before being transferred to the Germans. He also said that he pinned his Hungarian insignia on the uniform he had received from the Germans, for which he had once been arrested by Italian field gendarmes. The Public Prosecutor, József Melczer in his indictment made Almásy's book “With Rommel's Army in Libya”, the central subject of the charge. He complained that Almásy “*is praising the German camaraderie*” in the introduction to his book (Igaz Szó, 1946, p. 4). In his defence speech, Gyula Germanus explained that the book is nothing else just a war diary. Although the title may seem misleading, it is not intended to glorify the Germans. At the end of the trial, Almásy asked for his own acquittal, but the People's Court insisted on broadening the charges. The next negotiation took place on November 23. Almásy presented the declaration of the Hungarian Geographical Society, as well as the proclamation of Gyula Germanus and Lajos Weiss.

Almásy mentioned that with his humble scientific work and knowledge he always wanted to serve his nation. Moreover, Gyula Germanus’s writing was able to testify that Almásy could not be the sympathizer of the Germans and the Arrow Cross Party,

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<sup>26</sup> People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs in the Soviet Union was established in 1934, from 1946 until 1954 this law enforcement body was the Ministry of the Internal Affairs.





as his family had been mistreated by the Nazis. Lajos Weiss also reinforced Almásy's argument by asserting that László hoped for the victory of the Allied powers and helped his family financially, even though they were Jewish. (BFL XXV. 1.a 3501. 1946. pp. 45-46.) Beyond that, the explorer even wrote a letter to the Minister, in which he stated he had never been interested in politics and had only served as a soldier until he was obliged to do so by law. (BFL XXV. 1.a 3501. 1946. pp. 46-47.) In the end, the People's Court released Almásy on the grounds that he had joined the Germans on higher orders and not voluntarily (MAGYAR NEMZET, 26. 11. 1946. p. 5).

In Communist circles, Almásy's release aroused discontent. The columnist of the newspaper *Szabadság* also found the justification of the acquittal strange, as “*there were already many accused who were hanged, even though they also referred to following a higher order*” (*Szabadság*, 1946, p. 3). Consequently, in 1947, Almásy was arrested again. However, the cousin of the Egyptian ruler, King Farouk, bought the researcher out of the custody of the Hungarian authorities. Almásy crossed the Hungarian border illegally and stayed at his family estate in Borostyánkő for a short time. He then travelled to Vienna on a false passport issued in the name of József Grossmann. Then he went to Trieste. There he received British documents, which enabled him to travel to Rome. The NKVD agents followed Almásy's trail from Trieste, nevertheless he managed to escape from Rome to Cairo under adventurous circumstances. Alaeddin Mouhtar Pasha was already waiting there for Almásy, who at the time weighed no more than forty kilos (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 308-322.). Subsequently, the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* reported the story of his escape in detail (F. E., 1948, p. 2).

In Egypt Almásy often visited local museums and he was a frequent guest at the Desert Research Institute, founded by order of King Farouk I. To earn money, he organised desert road trips, guided safaris, and taught sport aviation. In 1950 he embarked on yet another desert expedition to the Sahara in search of the lost army of the Persian ruler Cambyses, but was unable to complete this tour. In 1951, an amoebic infection attacked his body, causing an abscess in his liver. He had to return to Europe for medical treatment. He was taken to the Wehrle Sanatorium in Salzburg, where Professor Victor Wehrle personally carried out an operation on him, but was unable to save Almásy's life. On his deathbed, Almásy learned that he had been appointed Director of the Egyptian Desert Research Institute. The famous Africa researcher and explorer passed away in Salzburg on March 22, 1951 (Kubassek, 2018, pp. 322–332).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be said that László Almásy's life was full of exciting and unexpected twists and turns. He was an adventure-seeker from an early age, and his family background has contributed greatly to develop his interest in geographical discoveries and aviation from a tender age. His noble origins notwithstanding, he faced financial difficulties on several occasions, as his brother János inherited the estate. During

the First World War, he met Bishop Count János Mikes, who employed him as a private secretary and financially supported Almásy’s subsequent expeditions.

The biggest turning point in Almásy’s life occurred when he was able to visit Africa for the first time in 1926, thanks to the Steyr company. Subsequently, he drove through part of the desert by car that had not yet been mapped, organised hunting expeditions and laid the foundations for flight training in Egypt. Nonetheless, it was his discovery of the legendary Zerzura Oasis and the Neolithic cave paintings near Gilf Kebir that earned him the greatest renown. Remarkably, in 1935, he was the first to speak of the Arab tribe of several hundred people known as the Magyarabs, who claimed Hungarian ancestry.

He served as a pilot in the Second World War and used his expertise in desert research on the African front. As part of Operation Salaam, he helped smuggle two German intelligence agents behind the British front lines, earning him the German Iron Cross. However, after the end of the war, he was severely tortured. He was imprisoned several times, but finally, thanks to the testimony of Gyula Germanus, the People’s Court dropped the charges against him. He spent his last years in exile in Egypt.

Abu Ramla’s life has been the subject of numerous books and films. Many books and films have been made about Abu Ramla’s life. Of these, the novel, ‘The English Patient’ is the most outstanding. Its film version, which was made in 1996, won nine Oscars. Thanks to the film, László Almásy’s name became known worldwide. I would like to conclude my study with László Almásy’s own words: *“And if some people would still ask me about what is the benefit to mankind of the exploration of a barren sea of rocks and sand, a few miserable patches of vegetation, or the discovery of a spring with a bad taste, why does such a thing need financial resources and personal risk to sacrifice, I can only answer with the words of the Bedouins: The desert is terrible and relentless, but who once has been there, must return to there”* (Almásy, 1934, p. 15).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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