

ESZTER RAKITA

A Story of Perspective of Persistence and Diligence: The Life of Victor Gondos, Jr.

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A STORY OF PERSISTENCE AND DILIGENCE: THE LIFE OF VICTOR GONDOS JR.

Abstract:

The article explores the unique career of a second-generation Hungarian-American immigrant, Victor Gondos, Jr. Gondos was born in Budapest in 1902, as a son of a Hungarian teacher-turned American entrepreneur, Victor Gondos, Sr. The family immigrated into the United States in 1911. During his college years, Victor Gondos, Jr. was about to start a military career but, unfortunately, he almost became permanently disabled due to an unexpected illness. After his recovery, he was forced to start an almost completely new life. He had to prevail in a new field as an archivist and military historian that, however, proved to be more successful than he would have ever expected. Victor Gondos, Jr.'s life is a story of resilience, persistence, and bravery, overcoming great obstacles and reaching goals despite many hindering circumstances. His story can also be interpreted as an example of an ambitious immigrant who wants to prove his loyalty to his new home country through actions.

Keywords: immigration, assimilation, Hungarian-American, 20th century, military service, US history, US Army

Introduction

The aim of this study is to present the unique career of a second-generation Hungarian American immigrant. Victor Gondos Jr. was born in Budapest in 1902 and he came to the USA as a young child for the first time. During his college years, he was about to start a military career but, unfortunately, he almost became permanently disabled due to an unexpected illness. After his recovery, he was forced to start an almost completely new life. He had to prevail in a new field that proved to be more successful later than he would have ever expected it. Victor Gondos Jr.'s life is a story of resilience, persistence, and bravery, overcoming great obstacles and reaching goals despite many hindering circumstances. His story can also be interpreted as an example of an ambitious immigrant who wanted to prove his loyalty to his new home country through actions.

In 1911, Victor Gondos Jr. emigrated to the United States as a young child, still school aged, with his family, during the First World War. After finishing high school, in 1922 he almost applied for a training in the Organized Reserve (Officers Reserve Corps) created by the

National Defense Act in the same year.¹ In addition, he was studying to be an architect at the University of Michigan. Because of his illness, he had to give up his military career soon and look for a new one. In the 1940s, after his graduation as a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, he became a renowned figure of the academic field of military history in America, proving he could serve his chosen country ‘not only with a sword but a pen, too’. In this paper, I attempt to explore the main landmarks of his special life path in detail. The most important source of this study are the Gondos Family Papers located in the collection of the *Balch Institute of Ethnic Studies* in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. From this large amount of archival sources, I, primarily, use a memoir² and certain letters of the extensive family correspondence to write Victor Jr.’s, the oldest son of the Gondos family, biography. In addition, I received useful information about his life from the records of the US Senate discussing his veteran pension, and its attachments during my research.³ The Gondoses had a rich and eventful story full of twists and turns which can be explored thoroughly from the resources. In this paper, although I only focus on the oldest son, Victor Jr.’s life, in some cases, I write about other family members when necessary.

Victor Gondos Jr’s career is a unique story in the Hungarian historiography. It is an immigrant success story as well as a story of persistence and diligence. Not many Hungarian immigrant soldiers’ careers are well documented in secondary literature. József Zachar, the renowned military historian, wrote an excellent book about Michael Kováts de Fabriczy, one of the “founding fathers” of the U.S. Cavalry during the War of Independence. This paper is part of a wider range of research, aiming to reconstruct the story of the Gondos Family based on an extensive variety of sources, embedded in 20th century American history.

Family Background

The head of the Gondos family, Victor Gondos Sr, was born in Szilágycseh, (Transylvania) 1879. Victor graduated as a civil engineer at the Royal Technological University in Budapest, at the beginning of 1900 and later received a doctorate in political science. He married Irene Trautmann (born in Budapest, 1882) in 1901. The couple had two sons: Victor Jr. (born in Budapest, July 20th, 1902) and Robert (born as Zoltán in Budapest, February 2nd,

¹ The National Defense Act of 1920 reorganized the armed forces. The three main branches were the regular Army, the National Guard and the Organized Reserve. The latter included the Officers Reserve Corps, into which Victor Gondos Jr. was enrolled.

² Gondos, Robert Z. *Recollections of My Early Youth 1908–1921*. Manuscript. Ca. 1978. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 3082, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978*.

³ US Senate Records, Calendar No. 1711, Report No. 1636: *An Act Granting a Pension to Captain Victor Gondos, Junior*. [United States Congress, House, Committee on Invalid Pensions](#). 1940.

1905). The first time the family came in contact with America was in 1904. Victor Sr. was delegated by the Austro–Hungarian government to St. Louis, Missouri, to study the local agricultural technology and production development. According to the renowned Hungarian historian, Tibor Glant, the Austro-Hungarian Government began a systematic examination of the US industry as early as 1881. Several economists and other governmental commissioners visited the country to study the American economy.⁴ The world expo of 1904 in St. Louis itself also sparked a series of studies about American industry.⁵ The event attracted many official observers with government commissions from all around the world, including Austria-Hungary. Victor Gondos Sr. was one of these observers. Glant even mentions the Gondos Brothers (Victor Sr, and Alexander who became an infamous journalist in the US) in his book, citing their works and briefly commenting on their activities.⁶

His experiences during this visit had a great impact on Victor Gondos Sr. This experience along with the lack of financial and career opportunities in Hungary made him decide to go back to the United States. In the summer of 1906, at his own request, he was sent again to the US by the Ministry of Commerce. His task, at the time, was to conduct long-term studies of American agricultural inventions and technologies, and to write reports about them to the Ministry. This time his family accompanied him. During this three-year-mission, they lived in Chicago, Illinois.

⁴ Tibor Glant, *Amerika, a csodák és csalódások földje. Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok képe a hosszú XIX. század magyar utazási irodalmában* (Debrecen: DUP, 2013), 158. [America, the Land of Wonders and Delusions. The Image of the United States of America in the Hungarian Travel Literature of the Long 19th Century.]

⁵ Glant 2013, 168.

⁶ Glant 2013, 170–171, 195–198, 215.

In this period between 1906 and 1909 the family led an ordinary middle-class life. Victor Sr. worked as an engineer at several companies. They returned to Hungary at the end of 1909. In a last attempt to make it in the old country, Victor Sr. established a couple of different enterprises but all of them failed in a short period of time. Soon the idea of returning to “the land of unbounded opportunities” came to his mind again.⁷ Thus, he found a way to receive a commission for another business trip this time from the Royal Hungarian Museum of Commerce.⁸ His decision was so adamant that had he not received the commission, they would still have immigrated to the United States permanently because, as he wrote to his father in a letter dated on March 10, 1911, “we are determined to permanently settle in America. This ground is not meant for us and this is not what we want to leave to our children as heritage.”⁹ So this time they returned to the US not as sojourners but as immigrants. In July, in the year of 1911, they arrived in New York City where they rented a large apartment in the Bronx. This was the beginning of the family’s new life in the United States.



Figure 1: Family photo from 1908¹

In the huge immigration waves caused by modernization and a rapid economic development after the Civil War, vast numbers of Hungarians began to sail to America in the 1880s. This period lasted until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During this time, around 2.5 million Hungarians (not only Magyars of course) moved to the US although not necessarily for the purpose of permanently settling down. The immigration wave from the 1880s to 1914 also had a peak period. Namely, between 1899 and 1913, according to the American immigration statistics, more than 1.8 million people from Hungary immigrated to the New

⁷ Gondos, *Recollections*, 21.

⁸ Victor Gondos Sr. received a stipend from the Royal Hungarian Museum of Commerce to study the latest technological developments in agricultural machinery in the United States. As a part of his task, he had to comply regular reports to the Ministry of Commerce about his findings.

⁹ Gondos, Victor. *Victor Gondos to Mor Gondos, March 10, 1911*. Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978*. Originally written in Hungarian, English translation is mine.

World.¹⁰ This figure is 1.17 million in the official Hungarian statistics.¹¹ This wave was dominated by poor East- and South-European agricultural workers who set out to the “land of opportunities.” Their proportion, for instance around the turn of the century, was 77 per cent.¹² The Gondoses did not belong in the category of poverty-stricken Hungarian peasantry. They did have, however, characteristics that fit into the patterns of New Immigration: better opportunities and the possibility of personal advancement pulled them to the United States. Their story of immigration and assimilation can provide a unique example of middle-class immigration in the first half of the 20th century, as well as a Hungarian version of “achieving the American Dream.”

Studies and Military Service

Both children, Victor Jr and Robert started primary school in New York, but the family moved several times. They lived in Bridgeport, CT, Philadelphia and Reading, PA, Dayton and Cleveland, OH, and in Atlantic City, NJ. From 1911, the children attended American schools, learned the English language, and became accustomed to American culture. Regarding his later life, it is not surprising that Victor Jr. had very good school reports, and was interested in military affairs. At the outbreak of the First World War, Victor Jr. was 12 and Robert was 9 years old. Victor Jr. was deeply invested in the events of the war. His brother writes about this period in his memoirs:

Brother Victor, keenly interested in military matters, posted a war map which showed Belgium and France and excitedly followed the progress of Von Kluck’s right flank as it swept through Belgium and Northern France and nearly enveloped Paris. We all watched with interest as the pins moved forward falling just short of Paris and, then as they retreated, the stabilized lines of later trench warfare.¹³

Victor Jr. finished high school in Reading, PA in 1920. In September of the same year, after a series of arguments with his father as to which university to choose, he started studying civil engineering and later architecture at the University of Michigan. He graduated in 1925. As he began his university studies, at the same time he enrolled in the basic course of the newly established Reserve officers' training unit in the Coast Artillery Corps Reserve. Previously,

¹⁰ Julianna, Puskás, *Ties That Bind, Ties That Divide. 100 Years of Hungarian Experience in the United States* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000.) 21.

¹¹ Puskás Julianna, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982.) 445–446. [Hungarian Immigrants in the United States 1880–1940.]

¹² Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 105.

¹³ Gondos, *Recollections*, 39.

during the summer, he experimented with sailor life on a coast guard ship. It soon turned out, however, that this kind of life was not suitable for him due to constant seasickness. Moreover, as a young volunteer, he was mostly assigned to cleaning jobs only. In 1922, he was accepted to the advanced course in coast artillery and after he finished it successfully in June 1924, he began to serve formally as a second lieutenant of the Coast Artillery Reserve Corps, in the United States Army.

His active military service was between 1924 and 1935. During this time, after graduating as an architect, he started working in his father's company as a design engineer.¹⁴ Victor served mostly in Virginia and Maryland and his most frequent station was Fort Monroe, VA. Fort Monroe was the home of the most important American artillery school, where they had intense basic and special training programs such as general artillery, air defense, and coastal defense courses.¹⁵ The artillery basic training took nine months, while the reserve officers and the officers of the National Guard had to participate



Figure 2: Victor Gondos Jr. in his High School yearbook

in a two-month-long intense and specialized training. Victor Gondos Jr. himself completed several trainings of this sort. Beside these, he performed active-duty service several times at Fort Monroe where he usually trained with regular corps.¹⁶

The dates of his active-duty tours were the following:

- April 4–18, 1926, Fort Eustis, VA;
- August 8–22, 1926, Fort Monroe, VA;
- July 17–30, 1927, Fort Monroe, VA;
- August 12–25, 1928, Fort Monroe, VA;

¹⁴ The Gondos Company was a civil engineering company which was hired as contractor for several middle and high scale construction projects during the 1920s, mostly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. These included several school buildings, and a couple of elegant hotels (e.g., Hotel Jefferson and Hotel Madison in Atlantic City). Usually all of these projects were designed by Victor Gondos Sr. Later both sons joined the family company for design and engineering works.

¹⁵ About the history of Fort Monroe: <https://www.nps.gov/fomr/learn/historyculture/index.htm>, accessed January 10, 2023.

¹⁶ *The Sunday Star*, December 23, 1928. Part 2. 5.

- September 13–November 3, 1928, Coast Artillery School, Fort Monroe and Aberdeen Proving Grounds, MD;
- July 6–19, 1930, Fort Monroe, VA;
- August 2–15, 1931, Fort Monroe, VA.¹⁷



Figure 3: Victor Gondos Jr. (right) on bayonet training¹⁸

According to his military record, during his service he was one of the most diligent reserve officers. As the document tells us, “He contributed both time, effort, and traveling expenses above and beyond the average to do his part in fulfilling the hopes envisaged for the country's benefit in the National Defense Act of 1920.”¹⁹ Since the reserve officers usually served at their own cost and to the expense of their civilian occupation (unpaid leave in most cases) this means that Victor sacrificed his working hours and days off as well as his money for the army. This could have been the reason that by the end of October, in his fifth tour of fall 1928, President Calvin Coolidge appointed him – and another officer, too – as the best who completed the artillery training, deserving the rank of 1st Lieutenant.²⁰

During his active years, Victor contributed heavily to increasing the professional military knowledge of officers in the D.C. area. Thus, an officer's club was established, named Coast Artillery Club, in Washington, D.C. Victor Gondos Jr. can be found among the founding members and later he acted as a secretary of the club, too. Apart from these, from the beginning

¹⁷ US Senate Records, 1711/1636. VGJr. Military Record.

¹⁸ HSP 3082, Box 2, Folder 3.

¹⁹ US Senate Records, 1711/1636. VGJr. Military Record.

²⁰ *Reading Times*, October 30, 1928.

of the 1930s he had been publishing articles on military topics regularly in the Coast Artillery Journal and local newspapers.²¹ He was promoted to the rank of Captain in 1930 (Figure 4).²² His hard work during the decade could have led to the promotion to the rank of Major. Most probably Victor Jr. could have further enhanced his good reputation among US Army officers. Based on his rising career, the assumption can be made that he could have received an even more important role during the Second World War, by which time he might have already been a chief officer. Had this become a reality, Gondos could have been one of the higher-ranking officers of Hungarian descent in the United States Army. The number of foreign-born individuals who served in the U.S. Army during the Second World War was over 300,000. These individuals, hailing from diverse backgrounds, made significant contributions to the war effort. The role of Hungarians in the Second World War in the U.S. Military, in contrast to the First World War and the Vietnam War, has not been explored yet.²³ Even less is known about Hungarian-born senior officers in the United States. Being a Major of the Organized Reserve, which Gondos had anticipated to become by the end of the decade, could have granted him active duty in the coming World War. The Organized Reserve did play a significant role in World War II. Organized Reserve officers constituted 52 percent of all officers killed in action, 28 percent of those missing in action and 27 percent of those captured by the enemy. Approximately one quarter of U.S. Army officers who served



Figure 4: Victor Gondos Jr. in his Captain's uniform

²¹ US Senate Records, 1711/1636.

²² HSP 3082, Box 6, Folder 5.

²³ In connection with the First World War: see László Ambrus, „Az első világháború és az amerikai magyarok. Katonai szolgálat és sajtóbéli visszhangok, különös tekintettel New York államra”, PhD Dissertation, (Eger, 2023). [The First World War and the Hungarian Americans. Military Service and Press Coverage, with Special Focus on the State of New York.]

²⁴ Regarding the Vietnam War and the Cold War in general see Endre Szentkiralyi, *Cold War to Warm Cooperation. The Military Service of Cleveland Hungarians. Egy amerikai város magyar katonái 1950–2014* (Bp.: Zrínyi, 2014). [Hungarian Soldiers of an American City]

during the war were from the Organized Reserve.²⁵ Gondos did not get an opportunity to be one of them, as owing to an unexpected event, the possibility of this was eliminated.

His illness and the end of his military career

The turning point of his military career came in the summer of 1928. More precisely, an event had happened at that time which could have led to it. This event is described in detail in the Report of the 76th Congress of the United States, Senate 3rd Session, April 24, 1940.

This report is a summary of the session in which the case of Victor Gondos Jr.'s veteran pension was discussed. In this discussion, the main question to be answered was whether he was entitled to a federal pension for veterans, based on his former military service.²⁶ From the text of the report, the circumstances of his illness and the period after, during which Victor had been struggling with health problems constantly, can be reconstructed as follows. Due to the length and detail of the report, I have briefly summarized the events.

During the summer of 1928, Victor Jr. received orders to report for duty on the 12th of August at Fort Monroe, VA. On August 11th, he departed from Washington, D.C. with another officer, Lt. Stanley McGee. Their plan was to sleep in Richmond that night and arrive in Fort Monroe by noon of the 12th. Sometime between 6 and 8 AM, an unexpected, severe storm arose, so they turned towards the city of Manassas to find shelter. Their car got stuck several times due to the weather conditions and the passengers became completely drenched. They needed to call for a special towing car to get into the city. They spent the remainder of the evening in Manassas. After some rest and drying out their uniforms and other belongings, they planned to continue their journey in the morning of 12th.

After the rain abated a little, the officers were busy getting information about the state of the roads. They learned that the flood over the entire watershed rendered most roads and bridges unsafe or impassable. Nevertheless, they had to push on due to the orders they had received. In the following hours, the rain became more severe again, "beating against the car with terrific force, penetrating every bit of fabric, drenching one to the skin, and necessitating a lengthy halt in Fredericksburg to partially dry out car and occupants again."²⁷ By this time they learned that passage was impossible towards both Richmond and Washington as the rain and the floods cut off all roads and bridges to both directions. Since they were under orders to

²⁵ The official website of the United States Army Reserve. <https://www.usar.army.mil/OurHistory/WorldWar-I-and-II/>, accessed May 26, 2023.

²⁶ Congress created the Veterans Administration (V. A.) to oversee all cases related to former soldiers' pension.

²⁷ US Senate Records, 1711/1636.

report at their posts of duty, the officers had no choice but to make every effort to get to Fort Monroe at all costs. After the weather conditions let up a bit, they were able to reach Tappahannock, and crossed the bridge onto the road towards Richmond. They were probably the last car to make it over, since the bridge collapsed directly after their successful passage. After this, the road to Richmond, and from there to Old Point Comfort was mostly without incident. They reportedly arrived at Fort Richmond at midnight of the 12th and 13th of August, and were greeted by two Richmond officers. They completed the approximately 400-km-long (app. 250 miles) journey in more than one day.

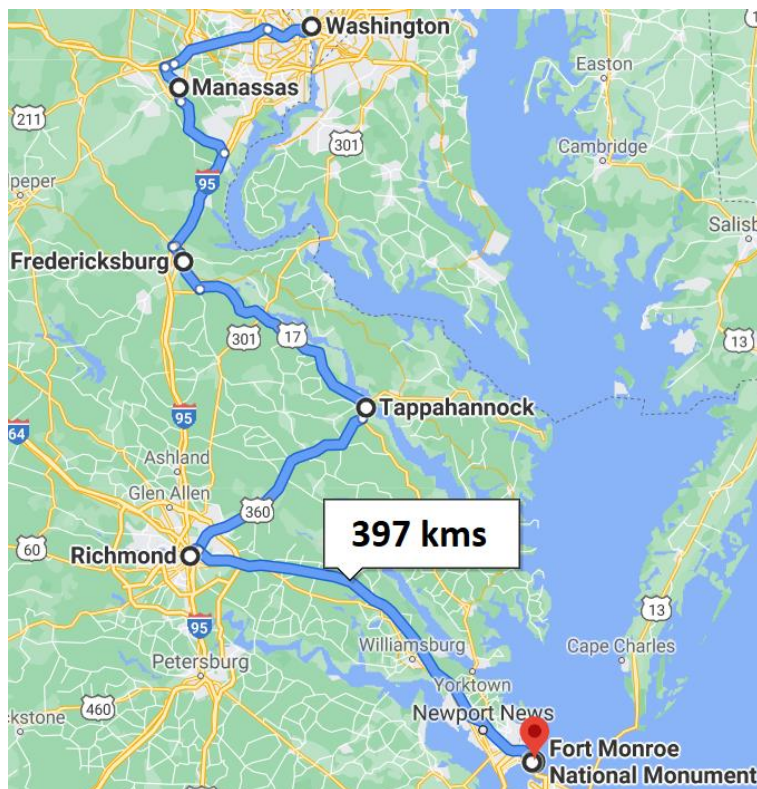


Figure 5: the road from Washington, D.C. to Fort Monroe, VA, on today's Google Map

Not long after these events, during the first week in camp, Victor Jr. began to feel uncomfortable around the region of the waist and hips, but not sufficiently to interfere with the performance of duty. He did experience several different sorts of pain, and a stiffness of his legs, which did not go unnoticed by his fellow soldiers. Since he was otherwise completely healthy, Gondos deemed these symptoms as a temporary unpleasantness and kept performing his duties without seeking professional medical help. After completing his tour of duty, and upon returning home, he kept experiencing different pains and began to walk with a limp. Since this was also occasional, he still did not think much of it. Due to his young age and good physical condition, he did not think he could have any serious problems.

In 1930, while he was on his sixth tour of duty at Fort Monroe, he had a minor accident. His boot heel was caught in a faulty step at the officers' mess, in the Old Sherwood Inn. After that, a strong waist pain and again, an uncontrollable limp appeared. However, it seemed to disappear after a period of time. Later that year, the pains recurred and Victor had to seek osteopathic treatments in Atlantic City, which again resulted in some relief. But from this time on, Victor had to battle regular headaches and neck stiffness. There was another minor accident during his tour of duty. At the end of the month, he attended cavalry training, during which he was heavily thrown off a horse. He was hurt in the lower back region, and subsequently felt soreness there, so ceased to attend further equine activities on that tour of duty. But he still had not considered this a serious problem, so he did not seek medical assistance, except for some basic osteopathic treatment.

Victor was able to perform in both his military and civil careers until the fall of 1931. By then, his back pains, headaches and neck stiffness developed more seriously. As he was trying to find a cure, he consulted a renowned Atlantic City surgeon, Dr. Roland de Hellebranth, to help him find out what his problem could be. The doctor finally stated that his problem may be an arthritis that had developed in his back. From February, 1932, his condition was so severe that he became permanently bedridden, and was deemed virtually disabled. As stated in the disability info part of his military record:

Besides a double curvature of the spine, which had developed, the left arm was practically immovable, and the shoulders, hips, and knees were affected and a partial closure of the jaw ensued.²⁸

According to his commanding officer of the time, Hershel E. Smith, Victor's condition changed radically. He lost a lot of weight and even some of his height, he became stiff from his hips above, but he managed to keep his hopeful and cheerful nature. The seriousness of the illness put a lot of stress on not only him but his entire family. His brother, Robert, remembers this period several times in his memoirs. The course of the illness and its impact on the family can also be followed by reading the family correspondence. As a vivid example, the father, Victor Sr. writes about his son's condition to one of his sisters in Hungary as follows:

Victor has been suffering from a serious illness for months, maybe years. The name of this illness is Spondylitis (ossificans ligamentosa, – spine – stiffness) to which a so-called myositis, neck stiffness is added since last summer. [...] Victor has been in a private room for

²⁸ US Senate Records, 1711/1636. Disability data.

eight weeks by now. He received treatment from several specialists and Pemberton. The progress, for those of us who only saw the slow destruction, is quite significant. But weeks, maybe long months can pass before Victor can be brought back home, and long months till he will be capable to work again.²⁹

A letter from Victor Jr. to his brother Robert of April, 1932 shows that his condition was so serious that he had to be anaesthetized for a tonsil surgery with gas, because his illness prevented him from being able to open his mouth for local anesthesia.³⁰ Despite the months of treatment, we can read in the letters from August that his condition still had not changed for the better, and it even turned worse. In a letter for his father, Victor Jr. complained that a new pain developed in his back, which made it impossible for him to use the prosthetic equipment that had been a great help thus far. He also reports that one of his upper vertebrae became stiff. He expressed his hope that he may be able to walk again after his doctor returns from his holidays. Victor describes his condition with a military metaphor: “I rather feel that Gettysburg has been fought and won and the road is now clean toward Appomattox but of course that is not a short road.”³¹ With these civil war locations, he indicates that he is over a turning point in his illness and all that is left is the final battle that he must win. Unfortunately, he was wrong, Appomattox was very far from there. Four days later, he was forced to dictate his letter to his nurse because he was unable to move his right arm. The regularly recurring topic in the letters of 1932 is the matter of money – partly owing to the crisis that had developed in the meantime. Victor expresses many times in these letters how much it hurts him that his family is burdened by his treatment. The topic of performing beyond their strength usually appears in the letters between his parents and his younger brother, too. They had to pay Victor’s expensive treatment in the middle of the great economic crisis, while their formerly lucrative construction business was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. These years are well described by the relevant parts of Zoltan’s recollections:

For three years Victor suffered great pain from his spinal arthritis, but when he moved back to our Pennside home, in May 1933, a Dr. Alexander injected a solution of potassium iodide which had an almost miraculous effect in stopping the active arthritis process. Vic’s illness had placed a great strain upon all of us, and we were relieved to see him improve.³²

²⁹ Victor Gondos Sr. to Miklosne Somossy, April 3, 1932. Letter. From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Gondos Family Papers, 1895–ca. 1978.

³⁰ Victor Gondos Jr. to Robert Z. Gondos, April 26, 1932. Gondos Family Papers.

³¹ Victor Gondos Jr. to Victor Gondos Sr., August 10, 1932. Gondos Family Papers.

³² Gondos, Recollections, 78.

There was some improvement in his condition in 1934. At the end of the year, he was sent to Georgia for treatment. In his letter dated on 7th November, he reported good news to his family. He wrote that he felt stronger and had put on some weight: he weighed 111 pounds (50 kgs) that day. This low number also shows how serious his illness was and the deterioration it caused in his condition. He also added that his legs, especially his knees, had improved, but his back still got tired quickly. He considered his one-hour-long walk as a success. As soon as he was capable of longer walks, he regularly gave lectures on military topics – mainly in relation to the period of the Civil War – at the local high school.³³

Due to the permanent treatments, his pains decreased steadily and in 1935 he was able to take longer distances again. To his whole recovery, a treatment in Hungary also contributed. By the middle of the 1930s, after their recovery from the economic crisis, the financial situation of the family made it possible for Victor to take part in a several-month thermal spa treatment in Budapest.

Since his ability to walk was still uncertain, his mother accompanied him for the journey. From the beginning of August, 1936, he took part in a strict series of treatments in the Saint Lucas Thermal Spa in Budapest. These included massages, baths and recreational gymnastics. In a letter of September 10th, his mother reported to her husband that Victor Jr. can lift his right arm a bit higher than usual, while in another letter eight days later she wrote that Victor was able to lift it above his head.³⁴ This was a serious improvement. Thanks to the treatments, his appetite also started to return and he was able to gain some weight. His mother expressed her joy in another letter as follows: “There are days when Vic’s face looks decidedly round again. [...] A few days ago, standing before the mirror, he admired the result of the treatments thus far: he looked almost as straight + erect as before his illness.”³⁵ Years of professional medical care in America, and the treatment in the thermal spa in Hungary combined, resulted in Victor’s successful recovery from serious illness. But he had to practically rethink his whole life and start a completely new career.

Not only was Victor’s military career destroyed by his illness but it also ruined his promising prospects as an architect. Owing to his long illness and his unfitness for active duty, in July 1935, the young Captain received his commission into Inactive Reserve. This statement hurt him incredibly because he was expecting to reach the rank of Major in that year. It also

³³ Victor Gondos Jr. to his Family, November 7, 1934. Gondos Family Papers.

³⁴ Victor Gondos Jr. to Victor Gondos Sr., September 10 and September 19, 1936, Gondos Family Papers.

³⁵ Victor Gondos Jr. to Victor Gondos Sr., September 27, 1936. Letter. Gondos Family Papers.

shows how important this was to him that in a letter of 5th January 1939, he asked the Governor of Pennsylvania, George Howard Earle, “to satisfy a sentimental ambition by according a disabled officer the courtesy title of Major”.³⁶ Ultimately, his request was not fulfilled. As he was aware that his military career could not continue in its previous form, he had to find another way to stay close to the army. When his illness became weaker, Victor enrolled as a history major at the University of Pennsylvania. He graduated in 1941. This was the basis of his archivist and military historian career.

Historian and Archivist Career

After an almost ten-year-gap, in 1942, Victor started working again. Using his history degree, he began to work at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. From the beginning of the 1940s, he actively researched and published permanently in the fields of military history and archival history. Aside from this, he played an important role in ensuring that the Archives could prepare successfully for receiving and processing the huge number of military documents created during the Second World War. After the Second World War, he worked as a leader of several departments of the Archives. At first, he was appointed as the Archives’ Editor of Microfilm Publications. After that, he was in charge of the business-economy, Civil War, and later the army and navy departments, as well. In this period, in 1947, he got married to Dorothy Ditter who was also a historian working at the American University as a college professor. An interesting fact about her is that Dorothy Ditter did serve in the U.S. army during the Second World War instead of her husband with a military background. As a WAVES officer (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), her duty was working on the logistics of replenishment of the Pacific Fleet in the Navy. At the end of the war, she was discharged as a First Lieutenant.³⁷

Since the beginning of his career as a historian, Victor Gondos Jr. had been a member of the Association of American Archivists. From 1943, he was the leader of the Committee on Archival Buildings and Equipment and, in 1957, he was also elected as a regular member of the management. In August 1958, he was invited by the Civil War Centennial Commission to be a member of the advisory board.³⁸ This was one of the biggest recognitions for him during his career.

³⁶ Victor Gondos Jr. to Governor George H. Earle, January 5, 1939. Gondos Family Papers.

³⁷ „Professor Dorothy Gondos Honored” – *The American University News Release*, May 10, 1974. 30. HSP 3082, Box 6, Folder 6.

³⁸ Civil War Centennial Commission, The Commission's letter to Victor Gondos Jr, August 4, 1958. Gondos Family Papers.



Figure6: Victor Gondos Jr. (right) in the research room of the National Archives³⁹

Since he was an expert archivist and historian, and he was also a qualified architect with extensive professional experience, he had become a widely known expert in the field of planning of archive buildings and interior design by the 60s. From 1961, he published articles in Spanish, thus, he was visited from Latin America regularly with professional questions.

In 1951, in recognition of his work as a military historian, Captain Victor Gondos Jr. was appointed editor-in-chief of *Military Affairs*.⁴⁰ From this time on, he carried the periodical almost on his own. His studies were regularly published in national professional journals – apart from the *Military Affairs* – mostly in *The American Archivist*. He wrote dozens of books and studies in the field of archival architecture and methodology. In addition, he taught archival administration, and history at the American University and he also gave methodology lectures at other universities. Finally, at the age of 63, he retired from the Archives in 1965.

On 20th May 1961, on the 10th anniversary of his promotion, the American Military Institute (AMI) organized a dinner party in his honor at the Washington Navy Club. At this event, he was greeted by prominent representatives of contemporary American military history

³⁹ <https://civilwartalk.com/threads/the-capture-of-jefferson-davis.79845/> accessed January 10, 2023.

⁴⁰ Stetson Conn, “A Tribute to Captain Victor Gondos, Jr. Editor of *Military Affairs*, 1951–1968”, *Military Affairs* 32. (1968) 3. 109.

and many high ranking officers. Others, including his parents who moved to Florida for their retirement years, sent their greetings in the form of letters. In a letter dated May 20, 1961, his parents wrote the following:

Thirty years ago your father [...] was honored at a testimonial dinner given by his associates in the construction of a notable hotel building.

Today, eminent officers of our National Defense Department join with leading writers of military history and with your friends and colleagues in a Testimonial Dinner that expresses their appreciation of your ten years of faithful service as the editor of “Military Affairs”.

As your parents, we are proud of you. [...] in these troubled times may God give this Nation many more citizens with the same high dedication to noble purposes.⁴¹

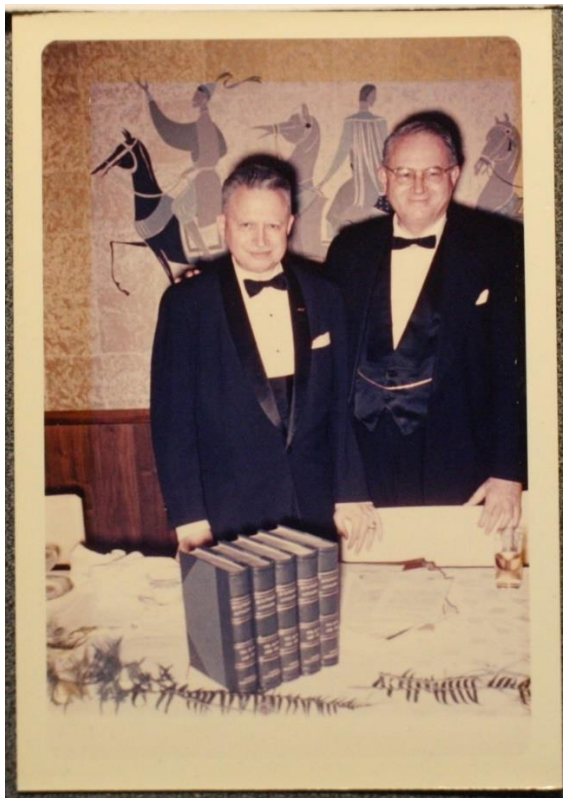


Figure 7: Victor Gondos Jr. and Robert Z. Gondos at the testimonial dinner organized by the American Military Institute in 1961⁴²

An article published in the fall 1968 issue of *Military Affairs*, edited by Victor Jr. for more than fifteen years, states about him that “the military historians of the United States owe him a debt beyond measure.” Not only did he edit the most important professional periodical

⁴¹ Irene Gondos to Victor Gondos, Jr, May 20, 1961. Gondos Family Papers.

⁴² HSP 3082, Box 6, Folder 10.

but he also took an important part in organization of military professional public life as well as in establishing professional contacts.⁴³ Furthermore, he was also recognized as a military historian when he was awarded the title of honorary Colonel of the Virginia State Militia by the Governor of Virginia. For him, this could have meant some sort of compensation for his early discharge and for not receiving the rank of Major at the end of 1930s.

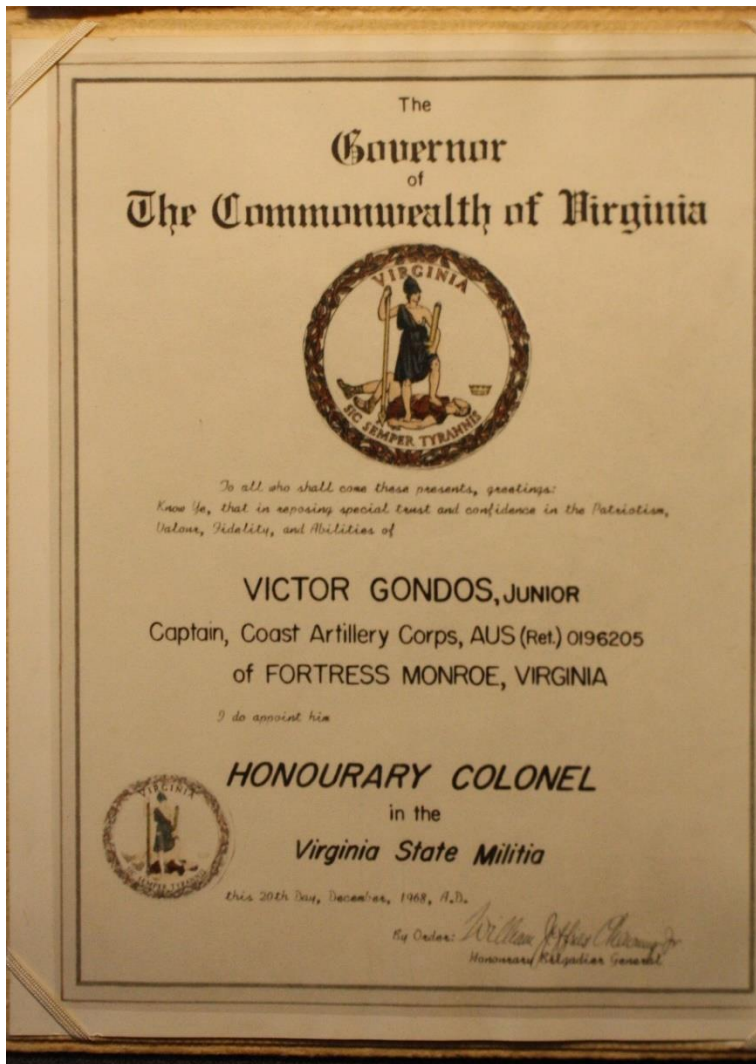


Figure 8: Diploma of the honorary Colonel award⁴⁴

His last aim was a PhD degree in history which he finally received in 1971. In 1965, he enrolled in the "Modern American History" PhD program at the American University in Washington, D.C. His research topic was the establishment of the National Archives of the US, as well as the history of the social movement for the establishment of a unified federal archive. He graduated in 1971 and the title of his dissertation was *The Movement for the National*

⁴³ Conn, *A Tribute*, 109.

⁴⁴ HSP 3082, Box 6, Folder 7.

*Archives of the United States, 1906–1926.*⁴⁵ The year before he enrolled in the PhD program, in 1964, the Society of American Archivists founded the Gondos Memorial Award with a 200-dollar annual prize to honor the best archival history essay of the semester written by a university student. The fund of the award was created from the donation of Victor Gondos Jr., Dorothy Gondos and Zoltan Gondos. They wanted to commemorate Victor Gondos Sr. with this award.⁴⁶

Five years later, on 2nd March 1976, after a new spinal surgery Victor Gondos Jr. passed away. His wife, Dorothy still had a long and productive life ahead of her, she passed away in 2005. They were laid to rest in Philadelphia.

Conclusion

Looking at his early career and his superior officers' opinion, a promising military career awaited Victor Gondos Jr. Considering his progress, he would probably have served as a senior officer during the Second World War. Although his worsening illness broke this career and led to another life path, he developed a successful career with hard work and he still stayed close to the military.

At his alma mater, in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania, undergraduate students can receive several research awards. One of these is named after Victor: *Captain Victor Gondos, Jr. prize for the best research paper or thesis in military or diplomatic history.*⁴⁷

As closing lines, let this quote about Victor stand here from a saluting article of 1968 which is a good description of his character:

Soldier, architect, archivist, historian, author, editor, with truly significant accomplishments in each field—few are the men in this modern age who can claim such versatility and achievement. Combine these talents with an affability that has triumphed over physical adversity, and you have Vic Gondos as we in the AMI have come to know him.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Victor Gondos Jr, *The Movement for a National Archives of the United States, 1906–1926*. PhD dissertation, Washington, DC, 1971.

⁴⁶ The Gondos Memorial Award. *The American Archivist* 35. (Jan 1972) 1.

⁴⁷ <https://live-sas-www-history.pantheon.sas.upenn.edu/undergraduate/research-prizes/> accessed January 10, 2023.

⁴⁸ Conn, *A Tribute*, 109.

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