

even criticism, never offended the human dignity of anyone. By nature he was solitary rather than gregarious; nevertheless, he mixed in society with the ease of a perfectly civil and civilized person, a species regrettably decreasing in number nowadays. Without doing or saying anything particular, he made his presence inevitably felt, simply by being there. He appeared seldom in public after retiring from his chair in Debrecen, but it was reassuring to know that, though not visibly present, he was in a way still *there*, working hard in his “pensive citadel” with unflagging interest and energy, even in the last few years when he was mortally ill, stoically facing the approach of death.

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LÁSZLÓ ORSZÁGH: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

I had known László Országh for more than half a century. He had been my teacher though I never learned anything from him. His first job was to teach English in my high-school—the *Érseki Katolikus Reálgimnázium*, known also as the *Rákócziánium*—where that language was a compulsory subject in the last four years of an eight-year curriculum. It so happened that I never attended classes. By a special arrangement (*magántanuló*) I had to present myself once a year for a comprehensive, thus rather difficult, examination, but I was dispensed from school attendance. In the last year of high school, with the dreaded final examination, the *érettségi*, approaching, Országh sent me word to the effect that if I continued with my former practice, I might be faced with difficulties. I ignored the warning with its ominous undertones. Yet in the course of the examination there was no resentment in Országh’s attitude towards me. He examined and judged me with perfect objectivity and gave me the grade “2” which at that time—translated—meant “good”. I do not think I deserved any better.

Following our graduation banquet, a nice black-tie affair, Országh (who was but nine years our senior) joined some of us in eating the traditional bean soup served in the small-hours in some restaurants of Budapest. We happened to sit side by side and he asked what I intended to do now, with my secondary education behind me. I told him that I wanted to become an orientalist. “Ah”—said he—“in the Eötvös Kollégium I had known one man with the same ambition. First he went nuts, then he killed himself. An interesting case.” We gazed at each other over the bean soup in the dusky dawn, Országh erect, as always somewhat aloof. “I hope you’ll make it: Lajos Ligeti seems to have succeeded” he concluded. This was the first time I heard mentioned the name of the young professor who, a few months later, started on the thankless task of teaching me at the university.

My next encounter with Országh was in the summer of 1956 when I bumped into him in the corridor of the *Nyelvtudományi Intézet* in Budapest. He recognized me, remembered our conversation over the bean soup and asked what had become of me. He was carefully dressed, with a type of hat not much in favor at that time, and greeted people with the amazingly obsolete "*van szerencsém*". For some years prior to that time English studies had been frowned upon in Hungary and Országh devoted his splendid talent as a lexicographer to the monumental task of editing the big Hungarian–Hungarian dictionary, the *Magyar Értelmező Szótár*. He must have suffered immensely in the course of the previous, unpleasant years and, quite clearly, handled me with great caution. By the time we next met, in the Fall of 1963, his reserve had evaporated.

To my, and his own, surprise, he turned up in Bloomington, Indiana, with—if I remember correctly—a Ford Fellowship. He stayed at Indiana University for a certain period and amazed everyone with the vastness of his knowledge and his superb command of English. I remember an evening in the home of Professor Cady—a respected expert of American literature—where he displayed his mastery of the subject in a modest, almost casual way. At that time, in 1963, my colleagues at Indiana University were not used to receiving scholars working "behind the Iron Curtain", and could scarcely believe that an expert in American literature of Országh's caliber might exist in those regions. I think it is safe to say, that Országh had little sympathy for the Hungarian political system of the first half of the 1950s. Yet, even when provoked, he did not allow himself to be drawn into any political discussion, he did not criticize, he never complained, not even to me. By then both of us were in a period of our lives when the age barrier no longer existed; two middle-aged men who were exchanging views on a great variety of subjects.

I had just built a solitary house in the woods which he and I walked together. He loved the place, and his familiarity with nature was a cause of constant surprise to me. Trees, flowers, ferns, animals, rocks—he recognized them all and gave their names in English, Hungarian, and Latin. He also impressed me with his deep understanding of American life. Before World War II, Országh applied for, and received a fellowship which took him to Florida. This stay in the United States left an indelible mark on Országh. He acquired a feel for what America really is, an understanding of how the system works. I have never met any Hungarian with a similar grasp of American culture—in the widest sense of this term.

From then on, and for many years, we kept in touch. He asked me to help his students to come to America, and as a result of our joint efforts, a number of young Hungarian graduate and post-graduate students could spend a year or two at Indiana University, teaching Hungarian and acquiring direct experience of American life. In the Summer of 1983, during some negotiations between my own and Debrecen

University, I noted with pleasure that on the opposite side of the table I could count three young scholars who had some training in Bloomington.

Országh was a bachelor, not particularly friendly or outgoing, and his cool detachment led some to believe that he knew little of what happened in Hungarian society beyond his own circle. This was not so. Országh was something of a gossip, with an astounding knowledge of trivia about almost any one in Hungary. I once asked him in a letter whether he could give me some information about a certain Mr. X, a not particularly famous person. Országh was in California with no means of obtaining information concerning the gentleman. Yet Országh's reply was immediate and began with the sentence "I don't know Mr. X". This curt statement was followed, by a detailed, witty description of Mr. X's public and private life, with thumb-nail sketches of the background of the wives he had, why and how he divorced, and numerous data on his family, habits, jobs he held, etc. Every time Országh recommended someone, or when I asked him about a student, he always provided information on the background, family, etc. of the person in question. Although verbally he could make rather devastating remarks, his immense good will towards the younger generation shone through all his letters. Perhaps sometime, after I have followed Országh where he has now gone, some students will write a short notice on our correspondence.

After his retirement our contacts became less frequent. Often, when I was in Budapest, we failed to meet either because of my busy schedule or his poor health. I think he was slightly hypochondriac. Usually he invited me for lunch in the Berlin restaurant, not far from his home, where he paid, what I thought, undue attention not only to his own but also to my diet. He handled these luncheons with elegance and—I hope—enjoyed them as much as I did. We used to talk about the Budapest of our youth, about trivia such as whether the lovely stationery shop was called Rigler or Riegler. He sent me his article on some English words in Hungarian with the remark that it constituted his scholarly swan-song.

He died in the year in which my old class celebrated the 50th anniversary of their graduation. We missed him at that reunion and many of us had many stories to tell about him.

Országh played a close hand, but he played it straight and well. I respected and liked that man.