

URALIC STUDIES AND ENGLISH FOR HUNGARIANS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY: A PERSONAL VIEW

THOMAS A. SEBEOK

Indiana University, Bloomington

Several participants in this assembly have asked me, in casual conversations since last Saturday evening, how it came about that Indiana University, located in a rural area on the Southern border of Midwestern America, with very few original residents of Hungarian extraction, came to be so closely associated with Hungarian affairs of considerable variety, ranging from education to business, from the arts to the sciences, and from high cultural affairs — our School of Music comes to mind — to puerile political posturing.

While I cannot begin to address this question fully this afternoon, I should like to relate just two episodes of this long and convoluted story in both of which I was deeply and personally involved: the earlier from the third term of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, i.e., the early 1940's; the later from the second term of Dwight D. Eisenhower, i.e., the late 1950's. I selected these because of their inherent and general interest. Both have to do with language and linguistics, which is my academic specialty.

Before World War II, Hungarian linguistics in America simply did not exist; and in no institution of post-secondary education was the Hungarian language ever taught. Robert A. Hall, jr.'s highly original *Outline of Hungarian Grammar* was printed by the LSA at the turn of the decade, and Leslie Tihany's *A Modern Hungarian Grammar* was privately published shortly thereafter. At Leonard Bloomfield request, I reviewed these, as well as John Lotz's *Das Ungarische Sprachsystem*, in the 1942 issues of *Language*.

With the quickening of the war, the situation of American universities grew increasingly precarious. The departure of male faculty members and students, having been called up for service in large numbers, left our campuses more and more depopulated and in academic disarray. At the same time, as the global nature of the war became evident, the Washington administration realized that the country simply lacked the most elementary expertise in pertinent foreign areas and languages of the world.

These two seemingly unrelated problems — how to arrest the degradation of university life and how to meet the pressing demands of our commanders in the field — were brilliantly solved in a single stroke by U. S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall.

In 1942, Marshall created an Army Specialised Training Program (ASTP), which, on the one hand, quickly repopulated enterprising university campuses, notably this one; and which, on the other hand, provided intensive training in dozens of languages

which had never previously been studied on this continent. In addition, Marshall devised and his staff designed a far-sighted infrastructure to fuel this voracious language-learning-machine with teaching materials. It so happened that I became deeply enmeshed, with a service ranking but in an essentially civilian capacity, with both enterprises: from the supply side as well as at the consuming end.

In 1941, the War Department established a large office in New York City, at 165 Broadway. I was appointed civilian chief of the Hungarian desk and the Finnish desk. It was my primary task to rapidly produce textbooks suitable for intensive Hungarian and Finnish language instruction for military personnel, in addition to several other types of language aids, including sizeable dictionaries. *Spoken Hungarian*, a book of ca. 500 pages, supplemented by four sides of audio materials, appeared in 1945; and the comparable *Spoken Finnish*, in 1947.

By the Fall of 1943, the ASTP became fully operational at this university. At various periods, the program involved about a dozen different languages, including particularly of Eastern Europe in the broad sense, comprehending also Russian, Finnish, and Turkish. I was originally hired to be in charge of the Hungarian and Finnish groups; eventually, I was made responsible for the entire operation, overseeing a large faculty of linguists and their corps of native speakers, the instructors for area studies, and of course the thousands of officers and enlisted men who were our students. The Hungarian faculty in Bloomington comprised six civilians, plus Army support personnel.

The language materials these students devoured in up to forty-four contact hours per week over a period of from nine to twelve months were normally the product of the New York staff, rushed to us here in mimeographed form practically daily. I myself commuted between my offices and billet in New York and my Bloomington home. (Parenthetically, one of my more entertaining assignments was to locate and hire reliable native speakers from ever more recondite language communities, at various times involving Azerbaijanis, Cheremis, Uzbeks, and the like, in search of whom I occasionally had to undertake hazardous trips overseas and to several prisoner or war camps.)

The vast IU segment of the national ASTP, including particularly its Hungarian component, was in part based, as we were to learn some years afterwards, on Winston Churchill's strategic intent and hope to launch the invasion of Europe via its southern soft "underbelly". In the event, and to their disappointment, most of the Hungarian alumni were sent to Africa or to Italy to monitor radio broadcasts in that language, to digest and interpret Hungarian printed materials, or to perform other remote intelligence functions. Some of our students joined the Foreign Service after 1945, many went into business, and a few are still pursuing academic careers.

Even before the war ended in 1945, I proposed to Herman B. Wells, our visionary and international-minded President, that we immediately commence building, solidly and with an eye to permanence, upon the resources that had serendipitously accumulated here during those years. He strongly supported all such endeavors, which ultimately flowered into an amazing diversity of research, teaching, and publication

schemes, including sizeable Departments of Anthropology, Linguistics, and others, plus a global variety of area-and-language programs. It would take a moderate tome to chronicle all of these, so let me only briefly dwell on the Hungarian programs.

Here, credit must go first of all to The Rockefeller Foundation, which committed large resources toward the creation of what in due course became our Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies. A bit later, an allied programmatic activity developed under the direction of my close friend and partner, John Lotz, at Columbia University. Eventually, especially in the early 1950's, the two of us, with the assistance of a growing number of European emigré scholars, were given invaluable moral assistance by the American Council of Learned Societies, which then translated into heavy financial provision on the part of the (then) U. S. Office of Education.

By the mid-1950's, I considered Uralic and Altaic studies adequately launched here at Indiana University, and, my attention having turned to other fields of study, I ceded my duties to my colleagues. The rest, as the saying goes, is history — literally so, in contrast with linguistics.

Eleven years then passed. The revolution had run its bloody course in Hungary just as the Eisenhower–Nixon team was being returned to the White House. In December of 1956, Eisenhower set up a high-level commission, headed by his Vice President, to deal with the flood of Hungarian refugees by then pouring into Austria, many hoping to enter the United States.

At the outset of 1957, between the Fall and the Spring Semesters, I was summoned to the office of our President, Dr. Wells, who informed me that, at Eisenhower's direct request, Indiana University was being designated to organize an emergency intensive spoken language training program for those Hungarian refugees who would shortly be heading either for this country or perhaps for other Anglophone countries, such as Australia, Canada, or Great Britain. I was that day being relieved of all my normal administrative and teaching duties for the next eight months, and ordered to devote, with ample funding, my full time and energies toward this goal. Next day, I left to consult with the Nixon team, already at work in Vienna.

The Hungarian refugees whom I interviewed overseas were, by and large, of College age, but not on the whole very well schooled. Practically none of them, as I recall, spoke any second language, save a little Russian. Considering the group's overall educational profile, I decided, on my return to Bloomington a week later, to set up three personnel modules.

The pivotal module was headed by an extremely able Ph. D. candidate of mine in the Department of Linguistics. Elaine's duty was to spend her days compiling an English-language training manual aimed specifically at Hungarian learners. Her partner was Victor, a Hungarian graduate student of ours, whose duty it became to translate at night into Hungarian the drafts produced by Elaine the previous day. Their joint product was typed and mimeographed the following morning, and copies were dispatched to Washington for distribution to all Anglophone training centers, world-wide, who requested them. The manual written by this team eventually well exceeded 1,000 pages.

A second team was formed to use the same materials in the English for Hungarians

classes here at IU. These classes, never exceeding ten individuals, received forty-four hours of language instruction per week for over seven months.

I also set up a third group, responsible for the day-to-day welfare of our Hungarian students, including their accommodations and feeding and their local social life, and also seeing to our complex liaisons with off-campus training centers using our materials. The short-range goal of this program was to enable those Hungarians who wished to do so — which was generally the case — to enter a college of their choice by the Fall of 1957. An added duty of the third module thus became channeling the students' entry into the normal higher educational life of this country.

By next August, this project, having fully met its integrative goal, came to an end. All of the Hungarians who had studied English on this campus at least, were settled in College communities across the nation. I still keep in touch with some of them.