

Remembering Professor Thomas Szendrey (1941-2003)

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For three decades Dr. Thomas Szendrey was Professor of History at Gannon University. He died on May 14, 2003, after three years of illness, following a stroke on May 20, 2000. During his life he was a loving husband, a caring father, a faithful friend, a learned colleague, and a man with a brilliant mind. He could have done so much more had fate given him a few more years to commit his brewing ideas to writing.

Thomas Szendrey was born in Budapest, although his family stemmed from the Trans-Danubian resort-town of Tata (Tatatóváros). Having left Hungary at the age of only four, he began his schooling in Austria, and then, following his family's emigration to the United States in the early 1950s, he continued his studies in Miami, Florida, where he completed his secondary education in 1959.

I first met Thomas during the summer of 1959, in Cleveland, Ohio, although I did not really get to know him well until the early 1960s. At that time I was a doctoral student at Indiana University in Bloomington, when that institution was the premier centre of Hungarian and East Central European Studies in the United States.

In the summer of 1960 Thomas came to our house in Cleveland to consult me about opportunities for a historian. Like I, he too was in love with history, but he too was in a cloud about the profession. We both refused to consider the practicality and applicability of our discipline. We simply loved it, and we were convinced that in the long run everything would turn out to be all right. Given this state of mind, I certainly could not give much practical advice to Tom. I could only convey my own feelings about history, and my own emotional attachment to the discipline that I wanted to pursue all my life. Having enrolled at John Carroll University in 1959, Tom graduated four years later with a B.A. (*magna cum laude*) in history and philosophy. Following his graduation

he considered the idea of following me to Bloomington, but in the end he opted to go to New York to pursue his doctoral work at Saint John's University. He did so under the direction of the Hungarian intellectual historian, Professor Boris de Balla (1903-1992), with whom he established a very good working relationship. Under Balla's direction he wrote a 440-page doctoral dissertation on modern Hungarian historiography,¹ in which he explored the development of the discipline from the eighteenth century right up to the 1960s. This work turned out to be a major intellectual endeavour that should have appeared in print immediately. It was never published, for the simple reason that publishers were (and are) always more interested in books with commercial appeal, than in highly intellectual works that have little or no marketability.

After having gotten married, and after having settled down in our respective permanent positions — I at Duquesne University and Tom at Gannon University — we began three decades of intense scholarly cooperation, punctuated by occasional debates and disagreements. We were able to cooperate in spite of our obvious dissimilarities: I being a traditional narrative historian who was constantly engaged in writing articles, monographs and bulky syntheses for the average lover of history on an easily comprehensible level; and Thomas being an intellectual historian, whose exposés were so sophisticated, poised, and elegant that they impressed even those who were unable to fathom his philosophizations.

In the course of his three decades at Gannon University, Thomas Szendrey became a much beloved professor. At the same time he was an eminently respected publishing scholar in the field of intellectual history. He taught thousands of young people the love of learning for learning's sake, and he introduced them to the values of Western Christian Civilization. Many of his former students are now highly ranked professionals or they are persons who occupy prestigious public or ecclesiastical offices.

Dr. Thomas Szendrey can claim authorship of about four score scholarly writings on a wide variety of topics, among them a two-volume textbook on the History of the General Councils of the Roman Catholic Church (Gannon, 1978). I have co-authored with him a number of these writings, and we also had grandiose plans for major projects to be completed after our retirement. Alas, that will never come to be.

Thomas Szendrey has also translated, edited, or was otherwise involved in the publication of a number of works. Among them were Edit Császár Mályusz's history of the national theatre in Central Europe (*The Theatre and National Awakening in East Central Europe*, 1980), Bálint

Hóman's unpublished manuscript entitled *Ősemberek, ősmagyarok* [Ancient People, Ancient Hungarians] (1985),² and the history of his own university (The Story of Gannon University, 1985).

In addition to his family and the discipline of history, Tom's great love was his ancestral town of Tata. He loved that place with the affection of a child for his mother. That is the town where he found his future wife, Enikő; that is the town that was constantly uppermost in his mind; that is the town where he planned to live out the rest of his life after retirement; that is the town where he hoped to see his valuable library deposited; and that is the town where he wanted to complete those works that were to contain much of the knowledge he had accumulated in the course of lifelong learning.

One of these books was to be a biography of Sándor Giesswein (1856-1923), a priest, theologian, philosopher, church historian, and one of the founders and leaders of the Christian Socialist Movement in Hungary. Giesswein was especially close to Tom's heart, not only because they shared similar ideas and views about the world, but because Giesswein too, was a native of Tata. Tom would collect everything about the life of his hero. He would write passionately about certain episodes of his life, and he would show me with affection some of the completed sections of his planned manuscript. If only fate would have given him more time to finish this work, as well as some of the others that he planned to write. The latter included a major intellectual synthesis of Hungarian history, that was to follow the Dilthey-inspired *Geistesgeschichte* view of historical evolution, and which the two of us planned to coauthor.

Having lived 120 miles (190 kilometres) apart for the last three decades, we could not meet as often as we would have liked, but we did see each other fairly often. We visited each other's homes and universities, we met at various scholarly conferences, and Tom would also come to Pittsburgh at least once a year to deliver a lecture in one of my graduate seminars. His lectures were highly popular and his perceptive view of historical evolution was always appreciated by my students.

Although unable to meet on a weekly basis, we were always in touch via the telephone. I called him at least once of week, which he would often reciprocate. Lacking colleagues with similar interests in my immediate vicinity, and bereft of people who could appreciate my addiction to the past of the Carpathian Basin, he was the only person (besides my wife, Agnes) I could speak to about issues that were dear to my heart. Figuratively speaking, he was a beacon in the barren desert that sur-

rounded me. This beacon began to flicker there years ago when he suffered a stroke (May 20, 2000), and it was extinguished permanently a nearly a year ago (May 14, 2003). I will miss this beacon, as will his family — his wife and his children — and undoubtedly also many of his friends.

During the three long years of Tom's struggle for survival, he was aided by Enikő, his faithful wife of thirty-two years, who fought for his life relentlessly, desperately and unselfishly. At the end, however, she had to give up. Her only consolation was that she had her son and daughter — Csongor/Tom and Tünde — next to her, to share the burdens of this uphill struggle for her husband's life. Undoubtedly, they will also be there in the future, to alleviate some of the pain and loneliness that will inevitably become part of her life during the coming months and years.

If the "iron chancellor" Otto von Bismarck was right when he claimed that "a really great man is known by... generosity..., humanity..., and moderation...", then Dr. Thomas Szendrey was indeed a great man. He was gentle, generous, and moderate as a person, and gifted as an intellectual. It is a tragedy of history that fate has not given him more time to make his intellectual capacity better known to the world. Even as it stands, however, he will be remembered both through his writings and through the achievements of his students. And we — his family and his close friends — will cherish his memory for many years to come.

NOTES

¹ Thomas László Szendrey, *The Ideological and Methodological Foundations of Modern Hungarian Historiography, 1750-1970* (New York, Ph. D. thesis, St. John's University, 1972).

² Thomas László Szendrey with Botond Clementis-Záhonyi, eds. [Bálint Hóman's (1885-1951)] *Ősemberek, ősmagyarok* [Ancient People, Ancient Hungarians] (Atlanta, Ga., Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1985). Dr. Szendrey's articles and review articles that appeared in our journal include: "Remembering 1956: Some Reflections on the Historical Consciousness of a New Generation," 14, 1 (Spring, 1987): 27-38; "A History of Transylvania: Its Impact and Reception," 16, 1-2 (1989): 137-150; "Some Reflections on Oscar Jaszi and his Philosophy of History," 18, 1-2 (1991): 51-58.