

HUNGARIAN CHAIR AT TORONTO: EXPERIENCES OF THE 1990s

Seven years ago, the American Hungarian Educators' Association held its fourteenth conference in Toronto, in conjunction with the fifth annual meeting of the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada. As I recall it was a chaotic and frustrating event. Others have assessed it more generously. My colleague and friend Nándor Dreisziger wrote to me: "It will be probably remembered as the last great North American conference on Hungarian Studies." From the perspective of the Hungarian Chair, this prophesy has certainly come true.

I have written so much about the establishment of the Hungarian Chair (most thoroughly in issue 1, 1990, of the *Hungarian Studies Review*,¹ and in Hungarian, in a 23-page booklet published in 1990²) that I am reluctant to repeat myself. I wrote about the heroic attempts of the culturally conscious Hungarian-Canadian community to establish a university chair; the fundraising campaign achieving success by 1978; the opposition of the history department at the University of Toronto against the original plan to use the endowment for a chair in Hungarian history; and finally, the inauguration of the chair of Hungarian language and literature studies in September 1978. Earlier I had reported optimistically about the achievements, and more recently, in an interview given to *Hungarian Life - Magyar Élet* (February 17, 1996),³ bemoaned the hard times that have fallen on the chair in the 1990s. Aside from the numerous copies of the above publications, I mailed a number of fliers to the organizer of the present panel in order to inform those who may not have heard about Hungarian Studies at the University of Toronto. These fliers are no longer up to date: they do not include recently approved graduate options and two new courses - however, the current masters of the administration do not think that allocations from the endowment for such luxuries as printing a new flier can be afforded any more.

Instead of repeating the often told stories, let me share with you some never told ones. You can be sure that they will have a disturbing moral.

Needless to say, I love the Hungarian language and literature the teaching of which is a tradition on both sides of my family. Thus it hurts me all the more when I hear, or read, primitive putdowns of language and literature in favor of politics or history. (The most recent of these pitiful remarks I found in a book on the history of the Rákóczi Foundation, Toronto 1994.)*

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Nevertheless, from the beginning I regarded my position as a spearhead for the expansion of Hungarian Studies. For an eventual goal I envisioned a center to coordinate research in such a way that, little by little, courses in Hungarian history, social conditions, art history, and geography etc., could enter the university curricula. Visiting scholars and younger research associates could have performed the dual task.

Realizing the obvious fact that the materialization of such an ambitious plan surpassed my ability and energy (not to mention my fundraising skill), in 1982 I developed a three-page draft for the rationale and tasks of such institute, and gave it to persons whom I regarded as trusted friends and colleagues. I should have taken an introductory course in psychology instead.

In 1986, when the Hungarian Research Institute of Canada was inaugurated as a "research ancillary of the University of Toronto", I found that the incumbent of the Hungarian Chair had no place on the twelve-member Board of Directors or on any of the many committees. I protested very loudly and reassessed my relations with my old acquaintances. Within two years I was graciously admitted to the Board of Directors, but nobody has ever asked for my opinion or cooperation ever since. The present president, secretary, and the third most important men of the institute are a dentist, a professor of food engineering, and a retired professor of political science who moved to Paris years ago. Aside from a handful of invited lecturers, all that the institute has sponsored during the past decade was the translation of the three-volume *History of Transylvania* (Erdély története, 1986). Judging from last year's activity report, the expensive project must still be very far from publication. And I still wonder: is a research institute needed to sponsor a translation and publication project?

After my failure to help Hungarian Studies branch out into other academic fields, I have confined myself to other, tested and rewarding activities such as teaching and research. But I have also run the administration of the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada, and co-edited the *Hungarian Studies Review*. Did I have any allies in these efforts? Yes, my loyal friends who constitute our association; yes, my editor partner Nándor Dreisziger. Unfortunately, I can hardly speak about the Hungarian-Canadian community as allies, which is regrettable for this community. Finally, the schizofrenia. Yes, I have received much-appreciated support for twelve years from Hungary's officials and authorities, especially the World Federation of Hungarians - books by the hundreds, subscription to some twenty periodicals, and much else. There was also contact with the Ministry of Education, Hungarofilm, and other institutions. Of course, I was walking on a tight rope: getting as much as I could without reciprocating it with politically exploitable material.

Since 1990, these contacts have evaporated. Hungary's current cultural authorities, including the World Federation, cannot care less about Hungarian higher education and scholarship on this continent, or at least in Canada. The illusion of the current and past government is that Hungary's future depends exclusively on economic indicators. Apparently, it has been forgotten that any government has a duty to represent and promote its culture abroad, and a responsibility to support the aspirations of that culture's members, whether they live (as in Hungary's case) in Romania, Austria, or Canada. Neglecting this responsibility will sooner or later result in dismal consequences. Do we have the right to expect substantial support from Hungary? I think we do.

The first decade of the so-called "Research Institute" demonstrates the price of incompetence. On the other hand Hungary's present attitude toward the North American Hungarian intellectual community appears to me as an example of callous indifference. We are left to cope with the post-communist maelstrom. I am sorry not to be able to listen to the reports of the colleagues from two American strongholds of Hungarian Studies, or to learn professor Hidas's view who has taught Hungarian courses at McGill University. Maybe they have a more optimistic message than mine. As for me, I have no illusions. Without radical and positive changes, effective Hungarian presence at North American universities will not survive the next decade, endowments notwithstanding, because these are insufficient. The University of Toronto's measures against the Hungarian Chair are ominous signs of what is forthcoming. In 1992 the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science refused, without advance notice, to pay the chair's mail, xerox, and phone expenses incurred during the past year. She could not find \$ 600 in her budget for this purpose. Neither did she have enough secretaries to notify me in time. If this is the present situation, what will the future be like? But again, kings, presidents, and professors have often prophesied that after them the deluge would come. I wish my presentiments would prove to be wrong.

The indifference affecting Hungarian Studies in Canada is all the more paradoxical since the demand for Hungarian courses has been on the rise in Toronto since 1989. This year I have had forty students in three courses. I am happy that I did not have more, since I have no teaching assistant. How could I effectively teach a hundred or more students alone? Assuming that the slow growth continues, neither the university nor Hungary or the Hungarian-Canadian community will have the pleasure of seeing that they are adequately taught, unless they finally wake up and take an active part in remedying the situation.

Notes

1. *HSR*, XVII, 1 (1990), 19-28.
2. *A Torontói Egyetem magyar tanszékének első évtizede*. Toronto, 1990.
3. "Azt is eltűnőfélben levőnek találom, ami van? Beszélgetés Bisztray György professzor úrral a Magyar Tanszék múltjáról, a jelen gondjairól és a nem túl rózsás jövőről."
4. Arday, Lajos: *A Rákóczi Alapítvány története* (Toronto, 1993), 84.

University of Toronto,
Toronto, Canada

George Bisztray