

Harold B. Allen in Debrecen

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Zoltán Abádi Nagy certainly knows the name, but it may not be an exaggeration to assume that Harold B. Allen's name is probably unknown to most of our colleagues who teach English and American Studies in Hungarian universities today. To those who are as old as I am, his name may sound vaguely familiar. When I first met him as a student in Debrecen in 1972, the second of three English Departments in Hungary had about 120 students taught by about 10 professors. It was easy to know practically everybody in English and American Studies in the country, and the news of remarkable events in the profession spread fast by the grapevine. That Kossuth Lajos University in Debrecen played host to the first-ever Fulbright-Hays professor sent to Hungary in 1972 became known overnight by colleagues in Budapest and Szeged, that is, by about the 30 to 40 senior and junior faculty members in the other two universities with English departments. Thirty-eight years later and after the fall of the Iron Curtain there are so many university departments of English and American Studies, with so many colleagues, and such a large number of exchange programs, that a Fulbrighter in Hungary today is quite unremarkable. For the historical record, in what follows I will try to reconstruct Allen's two trips to Hungary.

According to the *Lexicon Grammaticorum* (Linn 1996), Harold Byron Allen (1902–1988) studied American dialects at the University of Michigan under Hans Kurath and structural linguistics under Charles Carpenter Fries. From 1933 to 1939 he was an assistant editor of *The Early Modern English Dictionary* and from 1939/40 he was an editor of *The Middle English Dictionary*. He received his M.A. in 1928 and his Ph.D. in 1941, both in English from Michigan. In 1944, he moved to the University of Minnesota where he retired as Professor of English and

Linguistics in 1971. He taught and consulted at the University of Cairo, University of Tehran, and Kossuth Lajos University in Debrecen. Allen is best known for his *Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest* (1973–76) “which was the first Atlas to summarize the responses of the informants and to combine the results of mail questionnaires with field interviews.” Allen had “a profound effect on the professional development of linguistics in the U.S.” (Linn 1996: 21). He headed four national organizations related to the English language in the U.S.A., namely the Conference on English Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the American Dialect Society. He was a co-founder of TESOL and served as its first President in 1965.

Volume 23 (1990–1995) of the *Journal of English Linguistics* was a special issue compiled in memory of Harold B. Allen. I reproduce its contents here to illustrate the breadth of Allen’s scholarship and the many scholars whose respect he earned.

JEngL Contents

His first trip to Debrecen

In 1972/73 an unprecedented event took place in Debrecen: a Fulbright-Hays professor came to the university to teach a course named Varieties of American English. Before Allen, we only had the privilege to be taught by an English *lector*, that is a British instructor who taught a few language classes to the 120 students in the department. Now Allen was American, not a Brit, and a linguistics professor, not a lector. He taught us lucky students, and some interested young faculty, our first-ever course in American English, and he delivered a lecture titled “Can Americans Speak English?”

He also did something else, the importance of which I came to appreciate only later. In his own way, Harold Allen was an American cultural diplomat. He first became involved in teaching English as a foreign language in Mexico in 1943. After World War II, he served as consultant in several countries abroad, and realized that the British Council was leaving the United States way behind in teaching English as a foreign language abroad. In his paper on teaching English and U.S. foreign policy, Allen (1978: 59) wrote that “After the first tentative

beginning in Latin America, the English-teaching activity of the United States increased tremendously in various agencies and departments until it reached a peak just before 1970.” On the following page of the paper he adds that “most of the people directly involved in the teaching [of English abroad] were really dedicated to a cause. They believed that the teaching of English is a definite step toward the kind of international understanding that must be the foundation of world peace. I can say honestly that when I went to Egypt in 1954 and again for a second year in 1958 I was driven by the thought that somehow by helping to prepare teachers and textbooks for that country I was doing my small bit for the cause of peace. [...] It is idealism, yes, but idealism with a very practical motivation. [...] It is the same idealism that led also to the founding of the TESOL organization itself.”

Driven by his idealism and taking advantage of détente and his connections, Harold Allen played a key role in bringing about a “unilateral exchange program” between Hungary and the University of Minnesota, “by which the Hungarian cultural affairs institute and our Department of State have cooperated in sending four Hungarian students and teachers to obtain the M.A. in TESL at the University of Minnesota” (Allen 1980: 119). The first two or three recipients of the M.A. in TESL went to Minnesota from Debrecen.

Interlude: TESOL 1979 in Boston

In September 1978 I became Associate Instructor of Hungarian at Indiana University, Bloomington. In February 1979 I went to Boston to attend the Thirteenth Annual TESOL Convention. The convention was huge and I knew nobody there. I knew some people by name: Mary Finocchiaro, Christopher Candlin, W. R. Lee, Wilga Rivers, Pit Corder, and a few others, but didn’t know anybody in person. No wonder. I might have been (one of) the first Hungarian(s) ever to attend a TESOL Convention. It was an extremely pleasant surprise that I bumped into Harold Allen in the hallway of the Sheraton. We talked a little and he immediately offered whatever help he could. Somewhat later, back in Indiana, I decided I should start a project on the bilingualism of Hungarian-Americans in South Bend, IN. Apart from my determination to embark on this project I had hardly anything. I turned to Allen for help. He referred me to his former student Mike Linn, who, luckily, was soon

to come to Indianapolis for the Midwest meeting of the American Dialect Society. I went to meet Mike, and he gave me a great deal of help throughout the years to come. I enjoyed Allen's and Linn's moral and professional support of the South Bend project from its inception to completion (Kontra 1990).

Allen's second trip to Debrecen

In 1983 Harold was 81 years old. His aging Mercedes was approaching death and he wanted to buy a new one, in Germany, right from the factory, because it was cheaper to buy one in Germany and ship it to the U.S. than to buy it in Minnesota. He bought a Turbo Diesel, a magic car nobody had ever seen in Hungary before. The thing about a Turbo Diesel was that it used diesel, but was as fast as a car that ran with gas. Allen was proud of his car and experimented with it to find out its capabilities. When he drove from Budapest to Debrecen in September 1983, on the infamous Highway No. 4, which had only one lane each direction, passing was almost impossible. But Allen had complete confidence that his Turbo Diesel could pass cars that Hungarians could not. I was sitting next to him and Mrs. Allen sat in a back seat. Somewhere half way between Budapest and Debrecen, Allen felt like passing a truck although another 18-wheeler was coming in the opposite direction. I was breathless, and had I been interviewed by a sociolinguist, I could have given him/her a perfect "danger of death" report. I held on tight, couldn't do anything else. At that moment Elisabeth in the back yelled "Harold Allen!" It was then that I learned somebody's full name can mean "Don't kill us, crazy bastard!" in English.

We made it to Debrecen and on September 16 Allen gave a talk in the university titled "Sex Variation in Dialect Informant Responses". I introduced him as one of the grand old men of American linguistics: a famous dialectologist, who is also an applied linguist, and who isn't shy to write an ESL textbook. His Debrecen lecture was a rehearsal of an invited paper at the upcoming Midwest Regional Meeting of the Dialect Society, which was eventually published in three parts (Allen 1985, 1986a, 1986b).

Weeks before we drove to Debrecen, Harold issued invitations to about a dozen people to come to a dinner party in the best restaurant in town, the one in the then famous “Arany Bika” Hotel. Invited were Americanist colleagues from the university, Zoltán Abádi Nagy among them, two colleagues who received their M.A. in TESL from Minnesota, and the best linguistics professor at Debrecen at the time, Ferenc Papp. As can be seen from the photograph here, the waiters of “Arany Bika” were even able to put a little American flag on the table. Harold Allen played host, spoke about American–Hungarian relations, encouraged us to keep up our idealism, and we drank to American Studies and teaching English in Hungary. At 81, he made no secret of this trip being his swan song of a traveler in Europe.



When back in Budapest, I suggested to the Allens a trip to the Danube Bend. They enjoyed the open air museum in Szentendre, the royal palace in Visegrád, and the magnificent cathedral in Esztergom. Highway No. 11 being even narrower than No. 4, the driving was relatively safe this time, and we even stopped to pose for a picture on the riverside.



Harold Allen's two trips to Debrecen resulted in an arrangement that made it possible for Hungarians from Debrecen and elsewhere to go to study at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s, and he supported my project on Hungarian-American bilingualism, which later prompted other Hungarian linguists to put Hungarian-Americans on the language contact map (see Fenyvesi 2005 for a thorough overview). He was an important player, who deserves to be remembered for his services to American Studies and linguistics in Hungary.

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