

MIKLÓS KONTRA

VADON, LEHEL: *ORSZÁGH LÁSZLÓ*

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László Országh died ten years ago, in 1984, in his 77th year. He was editor-in-chief of the 7-volume Explanatory Dictionary of Hungarian (*A Magyar Nyelv Értelmező Szótára*, 1959—1962), which laid the foundations for all current monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. He edited the best English—Hungarian and Hungarian—English dictionaries available. He was a high school English teacher in Budapest (1932—1943), Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Debrecen (1947—1950 and 1957—1968), the founder of American Studies in Hungary, a dedicated scholar of cultural history, and, most of all, an inspiration to his students, who were later to become leading lights in English and American Studies in Hungary.

Országh was a living legend. His former colleagues in the Linguistics Institute of the Hungarian Academy (where the Explanatory Dictionary was made) and his students across the country still relate memorable stories about him. When compiling the list of entry-words for Hungarian dictionaries, *bolond* ‘fool’ and *bolsevik* ‘Bolshevik’ turned out to be unhappy but unavoidable neighbors. In keeping with post-WW II communist vigilance and paranoia, lexicographers were “urged” to insert a word between these two *as bolond bolsevik* would be treasonous if someone were to read the dictionary vertically, rather than in the more usual horizontal

fashion. Most lexicographers complied, inserting *bolonyik*, a word of Slavic origin known only to botanists; Országh didn't.

For several years after he retired from the University of Debrecen, he still visited high schools where his best students were English teachers. The famous professor whose name is seen on every Hungarian English learner's dictionary continued to visit high schools 100 miles from Budapest and to inspire teenagers to master English. In August 1994, I lectured in the Országh Memorial Section of the International Congress of Hungarian Linguistics in Eger. After my talk a young man introduced himself to me and said he had several letters from Országh, who once visited his class and offered to start a correspondence with some pupils.

In recognition of his bridge-building activities between the English and Hungarians, Országh was made Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 1979. No other Hungarian in Hungary has ever received such an honor. When a former student of his interviewed him for the Debrecen daily *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, Országh gave the student a copy of a photograph taken at the ceremony in the British Ambassador's residence in Budapest. As he handed over the photograph, he wryly remarked that the editors of the Debrecen newspaper would probably cut off the bottom half of the picture, because the CBE medal hanging from the ribbon around his neck looked like a crucifix, at least to anyone who hadn't seen a CBE medal before. In the officially atheist Hungary of the 1970s a picture showing a cross on the hero of the interview could be deemed "religious propaganda". The interviewer (who is my friend) told me this story, and we both agreed that Országh was probably overcautious and exaggerating. We thought it most unlikely that even editors of the communist party daily would use the editorial scissors to "decrucify" the picture. Needless to say, we were naive, and Országh was, as so often, a realist. The unmutated photograph has since been published in No. 52 (1986) of the United States Information Agency's Hungarian-language periodical USA, and now in Lehel Vadon's excellent book on Országh.

University teachers and students of English were a carefully selected and politically not very trustworthy minority before the dismantling of state socialism in Hungary in 1989. It was no big deal to know almost everybody

in the profession, that is the teachers in the English departments of the three universities and two teacher's colleges with such departments. Scholarships to English-speaking countries were a rather rare commodity for Hungarian university professors and almost unavailable for others. Books and visiting professors from England or America were equally rare. The profession was small and resources were shared through intensive networking. At the center of it all was Országh, the matchless, demanding authority in Hungary who maintained, and had us maintain, high professional standards.

In post-communist Hungary, British and American studies look very different. Now there are more institutions that call themselves universities than I can count. Each has something that they call an English department. Some of the heads of these departments have hardly anything to qualify them to be university professors of English. When Russian ceased to be a mandatory school language in Hungary, the demand for English and German skyrocketed, and no higher educational institution has a place in the sun if it doesn't have an English department. Unfortunately, the attempt to address the demand for English across the country has resulted in lowering our standards.

Paradoxically, some of the new teachers are better trained than we were 20 years ago, but there are also masses of unqualified teachers teaching English in public schools. English and American books are readily available today in Hungary (if one has the money to buy them), but the market indiscriminately hawks quality books and professionally worthless volumes alike, volumes that would never have been published or distributed in communist Hungary. Some of our younger colleagues have obtained M.A. or Ph.D. degrees in English-speaking countries, are active in Hungarian and international associations, and publish in refereed journals abroad. At the same time the quality of some papers presented at conferences in Hungary is far below any acceptable standard. As we struggle through these times of change, we may need to be reminded of where we come from, and what earlier standards are all too often being ignored. This elegant book on Országh comes at the right time.

A carefully presented and well documented biography (15—66) begins the book. Eleven excellently reproduced black-and-white photographs variously show Országh as a student of the famous Eötvös College in Budapest, among his classmates with Professor F. L. Pattee of Rollins College in Florida in the 1930s, lecturing in the Hungarian Academy in 1974, and last but not least, at the CBE ceremony where he received the “religious-looking” medal. Looking at the adult Országh in the pictures one cannot but agree with Gyula Kodolányi who has recently called him “a Hungarian gentleman”. I personally agree with Kodolányi one hundred per cent that Országh was an extremely genuine personality, very elegant, somewhat anachronistic in communist Hungary, who wore his elegance on his sleeve purposely to defy the political system around him (Kodolányi 1993).

Part two (67—83) of the book contains the bibliography of Országh’s published books and papers in chronological order, starting from 1929. His publications range from Hungarian and bilingual lexicography through Anglo-American/Hungarian cultural contacts to Shakespeare, Sinclair Lewis, “The genesis of the Hungarian name of the United States of America” (published in *Hungarian Studies in English* Vol. X [1976]), to an analysis of what American GIs read in WW II and many other areas. Országh called himself *a filosz*, i.e. a philologist. By that he meant a scholar equally well-versed in linguistics, literary history and possibly the arts. He belonged to the old school who were able to teach all the courses in the English department’s curriculum from Beowulf to modern writers, and the history of English as well as its descriptive grammar and lexicography. He had a hard time reading letters from his former students when they claimed that the time of the allround scholar like himself was over and that literary studies had become so specialized as to make it impossible to keep up with developments even in closely related fields like linguistics. The variety of his topics and the quality of his publications make today’s reader envy a man who studied the humanities in their integrity.

Part three (84—93) is also highly informative containing bibliographic items about Országh and his published works. Listed here are reviews of his bilingual dictionaries by the Columbia professor John Lotz, Országh’s Dutch

colleague R. W. Zandvoort, his former teachers, colleagues and students from Bloomington, Indiana to London, to Debrecen, as well as anonymous appreciations in Budapest dailies. The 86 items in this part show a towering figure in Hungarian scholarship. Those of us who knew him will always remember him. Those who are too young to have known him will find in his oeuvre a challenge of standards and quality enough to change their lives.

Reference

Kodolányi, Gyula. 1993. Egy magyar gentleman— a Kádár korszakban (=A Hungarian gentleman—in the Kádár era]. Lehel Vadon, ed., *Emlékkönyv Országgh László tiszteletére* [=In Memory of László Országgh], 237—242. Eger: Eszterházy Károly Tanárképző Főiskola Nyomdája.