

Andrew Vázsonyi 1906-1986

These lines recall the figure of a man well-known at Indiana University in Bloomington. He was born in Hungary and is buried in Hungary, but spent more than two decades in Bloomington, chiefly working at the University. I can truly say that he was a man who had very good friends and no enemies at all; those who knew him will not forget his personality. I have known him practically my entire life and we were very good friends both in Hungary and in Indiana. He was a man of character, a great scholar, and a very lovable person.

He was born in 1906 on the 6th of January, in Hungary, into a family with intellectual occupation. His father, whom I knew quite well, was a very gifted engineer who later became the president of the Hungarian State Railways. His uncle was a renowned liberal politician. On his mother's side, his grandfather and uncles were chiefly concerned with the theater; they were founders and directors of several Budapest theaters.

Andrew Vázsonyi, in his early youth, was primarily interested in music. His family, however, persuaded him to study law. After finishing his studies, he became a journalist at a well-known daily newspaper in Budapest and began writing theatrical reviews. During this period he also published his first short stories. After the end of World War II, he was, for a few years, the editor-in-chief of a culturally-oriented Budapest magazine, and also the head of a small publishing company.

He then moved over to Móra Ferenc Publishing House, producing books for children and teenagers. In this period, until 1962, he wrote and published several books and short stories, and

translated novels, mostly by French authors, with tremendous success. The translated books include works by Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Jules Verne, and others. Among his books for children was an adaptation of Joel Chandler's Uncle Remus, and he wrote a novel based on the folktale cycle of the fox as trickster. He also translated a selection of tales from the classic Persian collection, *Thousand and One Days*. The success of his books is clearly shown by the fact that they were translated into German, Swedish, and Finnish. He also published a half-documentary novel entitled *Piroska*, and several short stories in the leading literary reviews. Some of his works were adapted for TV, and were broadcast several times.

Andrew Vázsonyi was a very well-known and popular personality in Hungarian literary circles. Under his leadership, the publishing house issued several series of folktales and folk legends, which have been regularly reprinted. During this time, he married Prof. Linda Dégh from the Budapest University Chair of Folklore. In 1962 they were both invited to Bloomington, Indiana, and remained there for the years to follow. Prof. Dégh began teaching at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University, and Dr. Vázsonyi became Director of Publications and Associated Chairman at the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, from which he retired when reaching the age of seventy.

After their arrival in Bloomington, they both began to take part in a major project, which aimed to collect material on the lives of Hungarian-Americans. Dr. Vázsonyi was chiefly interested in the mixed language of Hungarian-Americans living in the Calumet region of Northern Indiana, and compiled a dictionary which, we hope, will be published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. (He had mentioned the curiosities of this mixed language in the first article he wrote while in the United States.) The results

of their common work were published in several books and essays, written in English and Hungarian, and also in German. Some of these publications are listed here in a selected bibliography.

Dr. Vázsonyi's interest concerning literature for children and young people had originally made him turn towards the folktale and the legend, and their effect on child psychology. This interest continued in the United States, but, in addition to analytical psychology, communication theory and semiotics were to become his focus of interest. A good example of this is seen in the paper co-authored with Prof. Dégh on "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore."

During these years he continued writing fiction, and during the last decade he began publishing again in Hungary, mostly short stories and memoirs. (Most appeared in *Élet és Irodalom*, a prominent literary weekly.) Some of these works are now in press and will be republished in a volume entitled *Beware the Rattlesnake!* This volume also contains autobiographical sketches on literary life in Hungary during the 1930s and 40s.

What kind of man and scholar was Andrew Vázsonyi? I should mention first of all his deep-rooted humanism, his sensibility, and his pervasive sense of humor. These characteristics made him very popular on two continents. As a writer, he was ingenious; as a scholar, he was a hard and patient worker. He was a folklorist as well as a philosopher and a linguist. In his writings the American reader will find interesting angles on poetics, genres, language, and semiotics. His reflections on legends, semiotics, and communication theory are outstanding.

It is very curious that out of principle, he was never willing to write fiction in English. In this way - even after having spent so many years in the USA - we can call him a scholar of international standing, but a Hungarian writer of fiction. According to his opinion, a writer

can express himself only in his mother tongue with the precision and fine details that he considered a first condition for good and valuable literary texts. At the same time we cannot but wish to see at least some of his short stories appear in English.

Andrew Vázsonyi was a dreamer, living in a world created by his own fantasy and described in his work. He fought for everything he considered to be important: for the harmony of human life, for justice. He was helpful and kind, not only to people, but also to animals, and could not suffer cruelty. Our generation in Hungary had to survive two world wars, but the sufferings did not harden him; on the contrary, they encouraged him to fight against brutality and madness.

I had the opportunity to read his memoirs while staying in Bloomington, and through them acquired a deeper insight into his mind than did most of his American friends, who could not read Hungarian. We often spoke about our half-forgotten childhood, trying not to get sentimental but recalling the quaint and the curious episodes, like practical jokes, amusing and teasing people. It is very hard for me to write about these conversations, for he was a good friend who disappeared from our lives. To quote the Hungarian folk-laments: "for you left a good repute and a good name behind you, my dearest heart."

This obituary does not even try to analyze Andrew Vázsonyi's scientific work - I just try to convey to those who knew him, that he was not only a kind, elderly scholar who walked his favorite dog in the surroundings of Bloomington, but a great thinker, who in a style that recalled the novels of Franz Kafka, described the absurd and surrealist world of the twentieth century.

Tekla Dömötör

Selected Bibliography

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